“Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made” – The Post-Pastoral Postapocalypse of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

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Tutkielma käsittelee maailmanlopun jälkeisen maailman ympäristöön liittyviä merkityksiä Cormac McCarthyn romaanissa *The Road* (2006, suom. *Tie*). Romaani on synkkä kuvaus lähitulevaisuudesta, jossa ympäristö on selittämättömän tapahtuman jäljiltä tuhoutunut lähes täysin. Erityisesti tästä syystä teosta on aikaisemmin lähestytty pitkälti näkökulmasta, jossa sen maailmanlopun kuvaus voidaan tulkita kritiikkinä ja varoituksena nykyaikaista yhteiskuntaa kohtaan. Tässä tutkielmassa pyritäänkin hahmottamaan romaanin ympäristömerkityksiä mahdollisimman kokonaisvaltaisesti, lähestymällä aihetta useammasta näkökulmasta. Tutkielman keskeisiksi kysymyksiksi nousevatkin, miten romaanin kuvailema maailmanloppu heijastaa nykyisiä ympäristöongelmia, ja toisaalta miten sen maailmanlopun jälkeiseen maailmaan sijoittuva tarina korostaa etenkin jälkimodernin ajan ihmisen luontosuhteen ongelmallisuutta.

Tutkielman teoreettisena kehyksenä toimii ekokriittinen kirjallisuudentutkimus, jonka tarjoamia näkökulmia sovelletaan maailmanlopun merkitysten tulkintaan, sekä sellaisen luontokuvan kriittiseen tarkasteluun, jonka voidaan nähdä olevan yhteydessä luontoa idealisoivaan pastoraaliseen ilmaisutapaan. Romaanin maailmanlopun kuvausta lähestytään etenkin maailmanlopun jälkeisen kirjallisuuden tutkimuksen avulla, sekä siitä näkökulmasta, miten maailmanloppua on käytetty tehokeinona ympäristöön liittyvissä diskursseissa. Pastoraaliin ja luontosuhteeseen liittyviä kysymyksiä taas lähestytään erityisesti post-pastoraalin käsitteen kautta, jossa klassisen ja historiallisen luontosuhteen tarkasteluun yhdistyy realismi ja nykyaikainen ympäristötietoisuus.

Tutkielmassa nousee esille, kuinka etenkin kerronnan keinojen ansiosta romaanin maailmanlopun merkityksissä korostuu ei-ihmiskeskeinen maailmankuva. Myös maailmanlopun tulkinnan mahdollisuuksien kautta välittyy ympäristökeskeinen sanoma, koska itse tapahtuman syitä ei kuvailla romaanissa, mutta kuinka sen jäljet – etenkin läpeensä palanut maailma – heijastavat nykyajan kulttuurin ympäristöön liittyviä huolia. Toisaalta, romaanin luonnoton maailma itsessään johdattaa lukijan ajattelemaan luontosuhdetta ympäristön monimuotoisuutta korostavalla tavalla, jossa luonnon läsnäolo voidaan tulkita ensisijaisesti ympäristöä ja elämää määrittävien prosessien kautta. Kokonaisvaltainen kuvaus ympäristöstä, jossa luontoa ei lähestytä idealisoivasti ja jossa ihminen ja ihmisten maailma nähdään erottamattomana osana sitä taasen korostaa nykyhetken arvostamisen tärkeyttä, jotta romaanissa kuvailtu tulevaisuus ei kävisi toteen.

Avainsanat: ekokritiikki, maailmanloppu, pastoraalit, luontosuhde, Cormac McCarthy

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1. Introduction

In the current day and age, it has become increasingly difficult to not be aware of the various environmental issues the world is facing. Whether it is climate change or overpopulation, these types of global issues are often interconnected and seemingly without any foreseeable solutions. The prevalence of discourse around these kind of wicked problems in the public sphere is also reflected in contemporary literature – through narratives that approach these issues and speculate the future, as well as through how they are being read. As a result, what may now be recognised as climate fiction has since the late 2000s emerged as a loosely defined genre that encompasses works that in some way relate to the current environmental issues (Irr). Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Price-winning novel *The Road* (2006) may be seen as one example of such climate fiction, as the novel's setting and tone mark a departure from the author's previous works – exchanging the American Southwest into a lifeless postapocalyptic wasteland that reflects many of the cultural anxieties resulting from an awareness of global ecological issues.

Based on how it depicts a near future setting in which the planetary ecosystem has collapsed as a result of an unspecified event, *The Road* has been widely read and discussed specifically from an environmental point of view. Not long after its release, British environmentalist George Monbiot described it as "the most important environmental book ever written", comparing it to influential works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), which stand as significant milestones in environmental literature (Monbiot). Monbiot emphasises how the environmental message of *The Road* can in many ways be more compelling than reports and studies listing the issues in the world, as instead of merely telling what the problems are, McCarthy's novel shows how much the human race ultimately relies on the environment through its depiction of a world in which society has

collapsed and the last remaining humans are clinging onto a planet no longer capable of sustaining life.

Indeed, in much of the previous criticism the environmental aspects of *The Road* seem to be predominantly attributed to its postapocalyptic representation – how the novel reveals a world that could very well become reality. To a certain extent, it may even be tempting to judge the book entirely by its context by making an intuitive assumption that the text clearly has to be environmental when a well-known naturalistically inclined author such as McCarthy is all of a sudden writing about a world in which the planetary ecosystem has become irreparably damaged. However, saying that the novel's environmental message is contained entirely in how its apocalyptic representation acts as a warning about what may happen would also be missing a significant part of it – specifically how the novel's narrative, focusing on a father and son experiencing a world in which culture and nature have become one in their mutual destruction, leads to further questions about the kind of values we assign to the aesthetic category of the natural and how these views may not be sustainable in the present.

As such, the goal of this thesis is an in-depth examination of the environmental aspects of *The Road*, taking into consideration not only the representation of its postapocalyptic world, but also how McCarthy uses this devastated world to explore some very profound ideas about the ongoing and changing relationship between mankind and the environment. My hypothesis is that the environmental ethos of *The Road* consists of two complementary aspects. The first one being how the novel's overall representation of the apocalypse implicitly points to the human race as the cause of the end of the world in a manner that is coldly naturalistic and decisively non-anthropocentric. The second aspect is how the postapocalyptic world reveals something important about the world that was lost, as the novel promotes a post-pastoral view of the environment in which many of the values assigned to the traditional idea of the natural world are questioned in favour of a holistic appreciation of the present world and all it entails.

The complete extent of *The Road* as an environmental novel is then fully realised through the interplay between these two levels of representation.

The overall theoretical framework of this thesis is based around ecocriticism, as the different components of my analysis are connected by the common theme of how we experience, imagine and communicate the surrounding world. Hence, I approach the two main concepts in my analysis: the apocalyptic imagination and the pastoral, from a perspective that is fundamentally ecocritical. My analysis of the novel's apocalyptic representation focuses on how contemporary environmental discourse and its use of apocalyptic rhetoric draws from the general notion of apocalypticism, as imagining the end of the world has existed both as a mode of thought and a literary tradition for millennia. My approach of the pastoral is likewise ecocritical, as my interest is not so much on the pastoral as a genre or a tradition, but rather on a deconstruction of the pastoral in order to approach the ideological constructs behind it, such as how we see the natural world and our relationship with it, as well as how historical and societal changes have challenged these views.

This thesis begins with a section introducing the general theoretical background as well as the more specific ideas. I briefly introduce the central concepts and developments behind the ecocritical movement, as well as how they relate to environmental thought. At this juncture I also consider the notions of the environment and nature in further detail, as I use these two terms in a manner that is not interchangeable, and nature in particular is a concept that is in a central role throughout my analysis. From here, I take a step closer to the end of the world as I discuss apocalyptic rhetoric in a general sense, and particularly how its prevalence in the environmental discourse of the contemporary era may affect the reading of texts such as *The Road*. I also consider some of the generic features of postapocalyptic writing, such as how these texts interrogate the idea of modernity as seemingly unending progress, and how this idea in turn relates to the environmental context as well as the pastoral.

My theoretical discussion then continues with an introduction of the pastoral as well as the post-pastoral, which is essentially a reconsideration of the ideological effects influenced by the pastoral tradition in light of the modern environmental and ecological discourse. Because the pastoral itself is an extensive and complicated subject, I am mainly regarding its aspects that directly relate to the post-pastoral, such as the idea of nature as a timeless place of origin and return. This section concludes with a look at a post-pastoral theory of literature, which offers a new way of reading the natural world, particularly in the current era in which the idea of nature is becoming increasingly challenged and compromised.

My analysis follows the general outline established in my initial hypothesis, with the first parts focusing primarily on the novel's representation of the apocalypse and the latter sections on how the novel offers an alternative way to consider the environment. Over the course of this thesis, I examine some of the more general elements of the novel, such as how its aesthetic dimensions, mode of narration and the treatment of its characters establish the postapocalyptic mood that serves as the basis for an environmental reading. I also consider some more specific aspects, such as how the ambiguous depiction of the apocalypse together with the marks of a global fire all over the novel's devastated landscapes contribute towards environmental readings. Later on I explore a more optimistic side of *The Road*, as under a layer of destruction and ash, its postapocalyptic world also reveals why the world we live in may be worth caring about. This latter section of my analysis focuses on how the novel interrogates many pastoral assumptions, such as the preference for certain kind of natural aesthetic or seeing past existence as simpler and better. In this regard, I argue that the novel represents a complex pastoral for the late modern era, as its message is one about how realigning our view of the world towards an appreciation of the present may be an answer to many of the global environmental challenges.

2. Theoretical Context and Considerations

In this chapter, I introduce the central concepts that serve as the theoretical framework behind my analysis of *The Road* as a postapocalyptic, post-pastoral text. I begin by discussing the academic field of ecocriticism, or environmental literary criticism, as many of the ideas and approaches I employ in this thesis are related to the study of literature and the physical environment. The purpose of this is not to explain in detail how the complicated relationship between literature and the environment has been approached, but rather to introduce some central problems in the field that are relevant to my analysis. I also further explore the seemingly intuitive, yet complicated notions of nature and the environment, as I find them to provide useful categories when it comes to understanding the textual spaces of postapocalyptic fiction, or what the pastoral means in the present day.

This brief foray into ecocriticism and the environmental discourse is followed by an examination of Western apocalypticism and themes of postapocalyptic fiction. The environment is also present here, as I consider apocalyptic rhetoric primarily from a secular, environmental perspective, and my interest in the postapocalyptic genre focuses on how it provides narrative spaces for nostalgic re-imagination of pre-modern life. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the pastoral tradition, where the attention is not so much on the form or the genre of pastoral, but rather on its ideological effects through discourses of idyllicised nature, nostalgia and retreat, and how these have shaped environmental thought. In order to go beyond pastoral, I explore the notion of post-pastoral, which could be explained as a contemporary response that considers the pastoral tradition and its effects in relation to current day ecological views and environmental issues. This post-pastoral theory of fiction provides tools for textual analysis that are crucial in seeing how the postapocalyptic setting can provide narrative spaces for late modern pastoral.

It should also be noted at this point that in those cases where I am referring to readers in relation to the text, I am making certain light assumptions about these readers. The reason for this is that an environmentally focused post-pastoral reading of *The Road* involves a basic awareness regarding both the tradition of pastoralised representations in Western context and the contemporary environmental discourse. This awareness of the environmental discourse also partially covers environmental apocalypticism, which I believe is a concept that may actually be more difficult to avoid than to be familiar with in this day and age, seeing as its presence in news media and popular culture has become quite significant. That being said, I do believe that the key notions relating to my analysis, such as the idea of going back to nature, or discourses of ecological sustainability are quite familiar to most modern readers.

2.1 Ecocriticism and Environmental Discourse

In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryll Glotfelty describes ecocriticism in simple terms as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). As such, ecocritical approaches focus on drawing connections between literary texts and the real world by considering literary environments as more than mere setting for human matters present in the texts. As Glotfelty states, literary theory in general has always been concerned with the relationship between literature and the world it represents and exists in, but such approaches have traditionally focused on seeing the world primarily as a stage of social interaction, where human experience in cultural context plays a central role. Ecocritical approaches to studying literature may then seek to expand this world in question, often by employing ecological thinking to de-emphasise the division between the human and the nonhuman in order to achieve a more comprehensive world view (xix). A central point of departure for ecocritical practice, particularly when it comes to its environmental aspects, can then be seen in a deliberate reconsideration of the anthropocentrically oriented humanist

thinking that has shaped the way both Western philosophy and literary theory have developed, particularly since the age of enlightenment and in the modern era.

Timothy Clark calls anthropocentrism an "all-pervading assumption" in human understanding, according to which the environment and all the things contained in it are seen and considered solely in terms of human values, and as such their worth is based primarily on what they can provide humans with (*The Cambridge Introduction* 2). In 1967, Lynn White Jr. famously suggested that this anthropocentric orientation, especially in Western context, has its roots in the Judeo-Christian concept of divine providence. The notion that God has created everything with a purpose, and as such "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" can according to White's then-controversial argument be seen as the origins for an anthropocentric attitude towards the environment (43). Such attitudes persist on all levels of human culture even in the age of science and reason, as although science places mankind quite far from the centre of the universe, it simultaneously enables the seemingly boundless mastery over the surrounding world that further reinforces the anthropocentric position. As a result, modern societies and their cultural products are to a large degree organised in such a manner that relies on viewing the environment primarily as something that is simply there, as material to be taken for granted and used.

A shift from an anthropocentric orientation towards considering the world from an ecocentric or biocentric position can be thought of as a starting point for many ecocritical approaches. One of the pioneers of ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell, alludes to similar ideas when he talks about contemporary environmental problems being the result of a "crisis of the imagination" associated with "western metaphysics and ethics", specifically regarding humanity's relationship with the environment (*Environmental Imagination* 2). However, this type of repositioning has its issues, because concepts such as ecocentrism or biocentrism, which emphasise that the human and non-human aspects of the world should be viewed and valued

in equal terms, are still reliant on rational human subjectivity. Greg Garrard highlights the issue by pointing out that "Only the 'drop of marrow' inside the human skull is capable of caring about the fate of rhinos or redwoods, only we construct apocalyptic narratives and therefore even a biocentric ethic must remain anthropogenic" (103). As Garrard observes, ideas such as biocentrism are ultimately ethical stances, and as such they are based on a realisation that there might be something wrong with anthropocentric thinking. It could then be argued, as Clark does, that "even 'biocentrism' is a stance taken by human beings and is hence 'anthropocentric' in a weak sense" (*The Cambridge Introduction* 3). Furthermore, because orientations such as biocentrism and ecocentrism exist as responses to anthropocentrism, and as they are a result of rational thought, it could even be argued that anthropocentrism is more natural to human beings, which further demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between human thought and the environment.

Attempting to reconsider the world outside an anthropocentric orientation is even more problematic when it comes to analysing literary texts, because language ultimately relies on separating the real world into objects and relations that mean something and into ones that do not. As literature and language are fundamentally based on making sense of reality by assigning it to categories that make sense from a human point of view, they can also never represent reality in a manner that could be biocentric in a strict sense. As a result, ecocentrically oriented readings of literary texts are instead achieved by actively moving away from anthropocentric thinking and introducing meanings through difference in contrast to traditional ways of representing the environment. As Val Plumwood points out, it may be "impossible for humans to avoid a certain kind of human epistemic locatedness", but that does not prevent us from being able to imagine the world from other perspectives and emphasising with other beings (132). The concept of post-pastoral, which I employ in my analysis, is a good example of a

new perspective when it comes to reading literary texts, because it is based on existing modes of thinking and ways of reading, with major influences from the environmental discourse.

The practice of ecocriticism has historically been closely related to environmentalism, in the sense that such approaches have a tendency to also argue for the sake of the environment, not only in ethical but also in political terms, even though by Glotfelty's simplified definition such attitudes would perhaps not be necessary. Garrard emphasises this environmentalist angle on ecocriticism, by stating that ecocriticism has become prominently established as a political way to approach texts, as it is closely tied to the environmental movement and environmental discourses in related scientific disciplines (3). Richard Kerridge offers a similar view, by stating that the fundamental purpose of ecocriticism is to "evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (*Writing the Environment* 5). Ecocritical analysis of literature is then always more or less environmental, and by extension it also tends to be political in the sense that it is not limited to pointing out ethical issues with the treatment or representation of the environment, but also raising further questions about what should be done about it.

This type of environmental rhetoric is not at all uncommon in the ecocritical discourse, which is apparent, for example, in how Ken Hiltner in his introduction to a recent anthology of ecocritical articles, goes as far as talking about saving the planet through reading, writing and critiquing literature ("General Introduction" xii-xiii). Although Hiltner's statement is perhaps more rhetorical than political, it does have a grounding in real world issues. Additionally, he notes how humans have considered and written about the relationship between themselves and the environment for thousands of years, while also claiming that modern approaches to such considerations are different due to having a sense of urgency about them as a result of the increased understanding regarding the ecological limits of the environment ("General Introduction" xiii). This sense of urgency that pervades ecocriticism seems to suggest that the

awareness of the modern environmental discourse serves as an important catalyst to such approaches to literary texts.

The prevalence of literary environmentalism, in which analysis of literature is used as a basis for arguments as for why the environment is crucial for healthy human existence, can also be explained by considering where environmentalism comes from. Timothy Morton concisely explains environmentalism as "a set of cultural and political responses to a crisis in humans' relationships with their surroundings", and ecocritical thinking that calls for a reconsideration of the environment in any literature certainly qualifies as one of these cultural responses (*Ecology without Nature* 9). Perhaps the notion that a postapocalyptic novel such as *The Road* can be considered an environmental work, prior to being seen as science fiction, could also be another symptom of the kind of changes in attitudes that also provides the basis for many ecocritical approaches to literature. After all, in light of present day environmental awareness, it might be almost impossible to read a postapocalyptic work such as *The Road* without at least considering it from an environmental angle.

2.2 The Environment and Nature

The environment and nature are two central concepts in almost any environmental criticism. While earlier ecocritical inquiries focused on the concept of nature, more recent criticisms tends to favour the notion of the environment, as it is generally considered to include the entirety of the manmade world and its effects on the whole ecosystem (Estes 30-31). This shift can also be seen in social terms, and as cultural anthropologist Krista Harper points out, the environment can be considered a global master narrative of the modern era, the influence of which permeates both worldwide and local political issues (101). Nature on the other hand, as Timothy Clark explains, may in this day and age seem a sentimental or anachronistic concept, as what actually qualifies as natural is becoming increasingly difficult to define (*The*

Cambridge Introduction 6). However, as Clark points out, the idea of nature remains useful in many ways, not only due to its long history of use and importance in language, but also because it implicitly contains ideas about whether there are boundaries between things such as the human and the non-human or different types of spaces such as urban landscapes and the wilderness (*The Cambridge Introduction* 6). Because my analysis of *The Road* involves both the pastoral, which has traditionally been concerned with idealisation of the natural world, and the post-pastoral, which represents a conceptual shift towards a holistic notion of the environment, I shall briefly explore both concepts in order to establish their relevant differences.

The environment can be understood in quite broad terms as a near-limitless object that encompasses the entirety of everything out there, although such interpretations generally would not consider anything outside a planet's biosphere. In this sense the environment would be, as Timothy Morton describes it: "That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us" (*Ecology without Nature*, 1). Morton's phrasing here emphasises the conflicting attitudes regarding the notion of the environment, as it is often seen as something external, while simultaneously recognised as being vital and important to all lifeforms on the planet. Additionally, the environment, or environments in a more limited or tangible sense can be understood as the immediate surroundings for people, places or physical contexts. The environment is then a rather flexible concept, as it can be used to refer to just about any physical space of any scale. This lack of a stable referent and dependency on context may already suggest that the idea of the environment is primarily an ontological one, in the sense that it relates to perceiving and communicating how the world is organised.

All these meanings of the environment have in common the idea of surrounding something else that is in some way meaningful. As David Mazel explains, the noun *environment* originates from the verb *to environ*, which would be nearly synonymous with the

contemporary usage of the verb *to surround* (139). Of course, as Mazel notes, "we no longer speak of what *environs* us, but of what our environment *is*" (139). Through this nominalisation, the environment becomes an object or a subject of language, which can then be described and defined more readily. The environment can also be considered an anthropocentric concept, as it quite literally relies on the human subjectivity either directly experiencing or imagining it from its centre. While this particular example is based on the English language, it would seem that the notion is shared in at least many Western languages. As an example, the German word for environment, *umwelt* is used in biosemiotics to describe the immediate object world as it appears to both human and non-human beings (Deely 2001). Although my focus here is on the human concept of environment, as it is communicated through language and literature, this notion of *umwelt* is nevertheless interesting, as it supports the idea that the environment is created through the process of perceiving and communicating signs in the physical world.

The environment, in the sense that it is used in the context of environmental discourse, is a complicated notion, as it relies on the ability to imagine the environment on a large scale, extending far beyond the empirical scope of an individual. In this expanded meaning, the environment could be understood through the discourse of ecological connectedness: that all the environments different beings occupy are connected and depend on one another on some level. The environment is then more of an epistemological concept than an empirical one – its existence relies on knowing what it is, not necessarily on experiencing it. As Mazel also points out, the environment in this sense can be approached through language and discourse, "as a construct, not as the prediscursive origin and cause of the environmental discourse but rather as the effect of that discourse" (143). Additionally, the environment in this broader, discursive sense is also rarely – if ever – discussed in a completely neutral manner, and Morton's statement about how "The environment was born at exactly the moment when it became a

problem", is likely not too far from the truth, despite the rather ironical delivery (*Ecology without Nature* 141).

Talking about the environment on a level of discourse does however have its issues, as such a view may oversimplify the heterogeneity of the global ecosystem. After all, global warming may not warm everyone's local environment equally and the rising sea levels may be a pleasant delight or a disaster, depending on where one happens to live. Environmental issues are not truly universal in the sense that they would affect all people equally no matter where they live, even though the idea of a global ecosystem itself is central to environmental ethics. As Garrard points out, a substantial number of the people living normal lives in developing countries could be even considered environmentalists by Western standards, simply because their effects on the global environment, such as their so-called carbon footprints, are way below the kind of levels people in industrialised western societies create on average (19).

While the environment is in many ways a more inclusive alternative that better represents modern-day reality with its extremely heterogeneous landscapes, the concept of nature is still useful when considering the human experience of being a part of the physical world and its literary representations. In seeking alternatives to the concept of nature, Kate Rigby notes that environment is not necessarily ideal to settle on for ecocritical pursuits, as it "presupposes a topology of centre and surroundings that implicitly prioritises human agency and interests" (363). For any discussion involving the pastoral, the problem with the environment lies precisely in how it is by definition centred on the human, and as such does not present any possibility for alternative positions. Pastoral, which has traditionally relied on establishing binary opposition between textual spaces, such as the rural and the urban, may become almost meaningless if everything is reduced to environment. As Garrard states, "Ecocriticism is essentially about the demarcation between nature and culture, its construction

and reconstruction", and it is precisely this dynamic relationship with culture that makes nature a useful concept (179).

The implicit meanings about how nature relates to the human can be explored through how nature has been defined in general terms. In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), Raymond Williams describes nature as "perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language" (184). Williams presents three central meanings to the word, which relate to how it has been commonly used in related academic discourses:

"(i) the essential quality and character *of* something;

(ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both;

(iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings." (184)

Williams points out that the idea commonly referred to as nature present in meanings (ii) and (iii) originates from the first meaning, particularly from the Latin phrase "*natura rerum* – the nature of things" (184). Ken Hiltner offers a good description of nature in this sense, as an endless process of the essence of the world itself: "It is birth, growth, and passing away, the endless process of process, whereby everything everywhere is ever coming into and out of being" (*What else is Pastoral?* 27). By these definitions, nature stands for the essence of all things and processes, which would make it a rather ecocentric concept, were it not for the hesitation about whether or not human beings are also included among these. It is particularly the wording in the second and third meaning offered by Williams that summarise the central idea that defines nature: the question about whether or not humans and the human world are also part of nature.

This ambivalence towards human belongingness in nature is not only present in pastoral, but it is implicitly contained in almost any reference to nature and the natural. Based on Friedrich Schiller's accounts on sentimental poetry, Paul Alpers explains that nature represents the *idea* about mankind's original condition that was lost with the birth of

civilisation and art (29). According to Alpers, due to the rise of human culture, “Nature, which once was simply the world in which man found himself and acted, is now seen to be separate from him, and presents itself as the ideal of harmonious existence which he seeks to achieve" (29). This idea of a tragic loss of nature that drives the pastoral ideal is also well represented in many ancient myths, the Christian concept of fall of man from the Garden of Eden likely being the most recognisable one.

This idealisation of the natural exists even to this day, as natural landscapes or even commercial products marketed as natural carry an implicit positive connotation based purely on the virtue of the word. Nature as a category that exists ideologically as a desirable opposite to culture has established itself as a central part of Western thought. Yet, drawing a clear line between what is nature and what is not remains ever problematic, particularly regarding the heterogeneous environments of the modern era. William Cronon points this out, as he explains that the concept of untouched wilderness – that we might consider the most natural thing – as the “ultimate landscape of authenticity” has also been actively constructed, often by removing evidence of human history (110). It is this difficulty, or even inherent impossibility regarding what exactly qualifies as natural, combined with just how easy it is to speak of nature as a thing that exists despite of this, that makes the concept of nature central in any environmental criticism.

2.3 Apocalyptic Rhetoric and Environmental Apocalypticism

The notion that *The Road*, and many other present-day works of fiction, can quite readily be described as apocalyptic or postapocalyptic, without requiring an extensive explanation as to what these particular adjectives entail, already says a great deal about how easily identifiable and common such imagery has become. While apocalyptic and postapocalyptic settings are popular in contemporary fiction and popular culture, to the point that they can be considered

genres of their own, the idea that the world might one day end is certainly not a very recent one. Greg Garrard explains that apocalyptic narratives and belief in the end of the world have circulated among various cultures for over three millennia (85). In the Western context, apocalyptic rhetoric has its roots in Judeo-Christian tradition, and the Revelation of St John at the end of the New Testament would likely be the most well-known example of apocalyptic writing to contemporary readers (Garrard 85-87).

Despite often being considered synonymous with the end of the world, the apocalypse is a multifaceted and complicated concept with a long history. Briohny Doyle notes that the idea of apocalypse serves as a basis for "religious and secular belief systems, literary genres, series of historical movements, and modes of socio-political rhetoric, as well as sets of tropes and symbols derived from and pertaining to all these" (100). Doyle explains that the word apocalypse itself derives from the Greek word *apokaluptein*, meaning *to uncover*, and the idea of revelation is central to apocalyptic thinking, as such narratives do not only depict the catastrophic end of the world, but also the revelation of a new "world of truth" after the end of the old one (99). According to Damian Thompson, apocalyptic narratives depict "revelation at the end of history" in which "Violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed" and where "the underlying theme is usually a titanic struggle between good and evil" (13-14). Apocalypticism, even in its traditional form is then not necessarily about belief in a tragic end, but it can reflect a culmination of issues in a society, and a utopian belief in a new world after the ultimate resolution of these issues.

Although the concept of the end of the world originates from religion, apocalyptic rhetoric has also been employed in secular forms, for purposes that have to do with human affairs rather than divine. As Garrard points out, romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Shelley and Blake, as well as twentieth century Modernists like T.S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis incorporated apocalyptic rhetoric in their works, although in these works the secular apocalypse

was presented as a response to issues perceived in the social order, rather than something related to the environment. According to Garrard, apocalyptic rhetoric associated with environmental themes first notably appeared in the works of D.H. Lawrence during early twentieth century, but it was only in the second half of the century, after the great wars and the technological advancements they brought, that the idea of an environmental apocalypse became truly topical. Works such as Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962) and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) adopted apocalyptic rhetoric in describing how technological advancements benefitting human life could eventually have devastating effects on the environment, whether it was due to the excessive and negligent use of toxic pesticides to secure crops, or due to the impossibility of sustaining the rapidly growing human population on the planet (Garrard 89-93).

Although this idea of an ecological catastrophe was heavily outweighed by the possibility of total nuclear annihilation during the cold war era, the situation slowly changed as the war grew colder towards the end of the century. As Lawrence Buell notes, the issues with the environment becoming more and more topical with the rise of environmentalism in the latter half of the century eventually made the idea of an environmental apocalypse a more likely way for the world to end than the nuclear threat during the cold war (*Environmental Crisis* 4). Buell also points out that the very real possibility of nuclear devastation rising to the awareness of the public during the cold war may have actually helped to bring apocalyptic thinking back to public consciousness, allowing such rhetoric to then persist and continue in environmentalism (*Environmental Imagination* 299). Buell argues that today the apocalypse stands as "the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal", because it represents the future for human society that fails to acknowledge the ecological limits of its own existence (*Environmental Imagination* 285). Environmental apocalypticism, then, relies on the scientifically plausible fact that planet Earth

as an ecosystem has the capability to become toxic, irradiated or otherwise uninhabitable to humans as a result of human actions.

The metaphor of the apocalypse and the rhetoric stemming from it is quite visible in contemporary environmental discourse, to the point that the end of the world may seem more like an eventuality rather than a possibility. News of catastrophic oil spills, nuclear disasters, and the continuing extinction of species all herald an apocalypse that is manmade in design. Garrard argues that this prevalence of apocalyptic rhetoric is not only caused by its ability to easily generate drama, which the news media tends to be interested in, but also because it allows the representation of complex ecological issues as events, rather than processes, thus fitting framework of apocalyptic rhetoric (105). The issue of climate change for example seems to be often approached through its possibly devastating effects to human life, as if it were a single inevitable event, rather than going into details about the complicated ecological issues it consists of. Garrard also suggests that apocalyptic rhetoric presents a fairly simple and understandable frame of reference, which can potentially reduce complex ecological issues to more readily comprehensible ones (105). In this kind of reductionist thinking that is not completely foreign to environmentalist rhetoric, global corporations stand in opposition to environmentalists, and the idea of environmentalism itself may be compared to the struggle between good and evil at the end of the world.

Environmentalism relies heavily on apocalypticism, which on the other hand is based on imagination. Buell argues that apocalyptic rhetoric works because it suggests that "the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to the sense of crisis" (*Environmental Imagination* 285). Environmental apocalypticism is then dialectical, as Garrard also points out, so that it does not only respond to a perceived crisis but also contributes to its creation (86). In order to avoid the end of the world, we must first be able to imagine the potential things that could lead to it. This dialectic may go to some length as to explain why apocalyptic and

postapocalyptic fiction have gained popularity in the current era, as they offer a narrative space for further expanding upon apocalyptic rhetoric constantly present in other forms of media. Additionally, the prevalence of environmental apocalypticism may also have an effect on the production and reception of any apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction, to the degree that it may become increasingly difficult to not view any such fiction through an environmental lens.

2.4 Postapocalyptic Fiction and Life after the Fall of Modernity

Due to apocalyptic rhetoric often framing conversations about the environment and its relation to society, the end of the world in the late modern context may seem at times to have become a constantly ongoing development. In many ways, this manner of apocalypticism – or perhaps the lack of any – could be seen as symptomatic of late modernity, which as a cultural and historical point of view emphasises ideas of steady, continuing development of society through economic growth and technological progress. Within this cultural framework, even the apocalypse can be reduced to just another ongoing process that may very well never reach its culmination. Furthermore, in a world where environmental impact is measured in terms of money, and where nuclear weapons appear mainly as numbers and bars on exciting infographics, it is perhaps no longer necessary to imagine how the world will end, but rather what comes after. As such, it is not at all surprising that we are seeing a surge in the popularity of postapocalyptic fiction, particularly since the turn of the millennium. These texts that portray human life after the end of the world can be seen as a response to this late modern existence, as they may present many of the cultural phenomena that constitute modernity as more unstable or unnecessary than they seem in the cultural context itself.

Postapocalyptic fiction in its contemporary forms is often considered a subgenre of science fiction that became popular during the latter half of the twentieth century. Although I am hesitant to strictly classify postapocalyptic under science fiction, some of the features that

define science fiction are useful in understanding the construction of postapocalyptic fiction. Prominent theorist of science fiction Darko Suvin defines science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7-8). In science fiction, the real world is in some way changed to become different, yet familiar through the introduction of imagined changes. This newness that is introduced to the world as we know it, or "novum" as Suvin calls it, is the narrative device that constructs the imaginative framework that separates science fiction from reality. This newness can be represented by just about anything from a technological development to an event, providing that these are even remotely plausible from a scientific perspective (63). The interaction of estrangement and cognition, which according to Suvin is fundamental to science fiction, is established in how the readers of these texts can recognise the familiar among the unfamiliar, while simultaneously considering how these changes came to be, and what basis they have in reality.

Much like science fiction in general, postapocalyptic fiction is about imagining a changed world while simultaneously not straying too far from reality. In postapocalyptic fiction, the event of the apocalypse itself stands for the novum, as many of these texts simply transform the real world by portraying them after an imagined world-ending disaster. The element of cognitive estrangement is strongly represented in postapocalyptic narratives, because the apocalypse can change everything that is familiar about the world, yet these changes are usually not so outlandish as to require extreme suspension of disbelief to process. Postapocalyptic fiction relies not only on the ability to imagine the new transformed world, but because the postapocalyptic settings are only unfamiliar to a certain extent, they also constantly emphasise the cognitive processes that remind the readers of how the postapocalyptic world could actually become reality. Postapocalyptic fiction then never fully allows its readers to

leave the real world behind, which can make its implications regarding any topical issues in the world meaningful.

Although postapocalyptic fiction is often associated with science fiction, the apocalypse in it represents more than just a way to introduce strange newness to the world. Texts that are about life after the end of the world, and could thus be considered postapocalyptic, have been produced ever since the secular apocalypse became imaginable. This connection between the postapocalypse and the secular apocalypse is essential, as the secular apocalypse itself includes the idea that there is no divine solution to mankind's issues, but that the end of the world will only leave a transformed world in its wake. As such, postapocalyptic fiction, as an extension of secular apocalypticism, can often be seen and read as s response to social and cultural issues of its time.

In her brief analysis of the history of the genre, Heather Hicks traces the postapocalyptic novel to the eighteenth century, to works such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), the former of which she considers the prototypical postapocalyptic novel. Although *Robinson Crusoe* is not truly postapocalyptic in the sense that its events do not take place after the end of the world, Hicks points out that the way the novel deals with the loss of modernity followed by an attempt to rebuild it, makes it a good example of how postapocalyptic texts work. Hicks states that such narratives nearly always present a narrative of the fall of the modern, which she argues is realised through "retreat to fantasies of the premodern" (2-3). An example of this could be the typical postapocalyptic setting, in which people are forced to scavenge for food in ruined cities. These settings contain the ruins of modernity both literally and figuratively, as they are full of landscapes of abandoned cities filled with decrepit skyscrapers and portrayals of pre-modern life dependant on forage or salvage rather than commerce. Following this logic, Hicks argues that the postapocalyptic

genre has become particularly popular in our current time, precisely because it can simultaneously question multiple categories of the seemingly ever-ongoing modernity (2).

Hicks also points out that the responses to modernity in postapocalyptic narratives have changed tremendously as the idea of modernity and attitudes towards it have progressed throughout the recent centuries. She notes that eighteenth and nineteenth century postapocalyptic works, such as *Robinson Crusoe* or Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) portray the fall of modernity primarily in tragic terms, as a significant loss to both the individual and society. However, postapocalyptic texts of the early twentieth century, such as Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), no longer necessarily fully represent this idea of the tragic postapocalypse, and they can even portray the return to a pre-modern life as a source of relief from the oppressing aspects of modern life. Hicks observes that in the cold war period, postapocalyptic novels even began to view the collapse of modernity as a positive alternative, by presenting the end of the world in comfortable terms. An example of this is John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), in which the few survivors of the end of the world get to enjoy a relaxing life after most of the population has perished in an apocalyptic event (Hicks 4).

Many late twentieth century postapocalyptic texts on the other hand began to offer very different takes on the end of the world, as they too became influenced the postmodern turn in literature. Works such as Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) represent what Hicks calls "actively postmodern post-apocalyptic narratives". While these texts employ many postapocalyptic tropes, they also differ from previous postapocalyptic fiction as they no longer necessarily take place after an actual end of the world, but rather consider what Hicks calls "nonmodern ontologies" (5). That is, the postapocalyptic aspects of such works may be concerned with the collapse of individual

systems relating to modernity or even the relative fragility of reality itself, as they explore some very fundamental ontological questions through the apocalyptic imagination.

Although postmodernist features are present in contemporary postapocalyptic works, such as is the case with the relatively fragmented narrative structure in *The Road*, many of these texts still firmly rely on modernity as a category of narratives to which they respond to. This idea of modernity as narratives, which Hicks also refers to, is based on Fredric Jameson's examination of the idea of modernity. Jameson argues that the often very complicated modernity is best understood not as a concept, but rather as a narrative category that contains within it the kind of tropes or ongoing narratives that at a certain point of history separate the present moment from the past (39-41). Considered from this point of view, modernity can be thought of as the combined narratives of contemporary development that have not yet reached their conclusions to such a degree that they could be historicised. The incompleteness of these narratives also makes them difficult to approach, which could at least partially explain why modernity is often considered to be an elusive concept to define. Postapocalyptic fiction, however, uses the apocalypse to provide a convenient end to history, which allows at least some aspects of modernity to be deconstructed and examined by digging through the remnants of the world.

In a similar vein, Briohny Doyle argues that the kind of postapocalyptic fiction written and read in the twenty-first century can often be seen as response to the narrative of endless economic growth typical to the era of late capitalism, or to the very idea that capitalism represents the final social evolution of human society (101). As Karen Renner points out, many contemporary postapocalyptic narratives feature ordinary people who find themselves to possess completely new talents when they are no longer restricted by the "corrupt hierarchy organizing our current existence" (207). The zombie apocalypse, which is very prominently represented in current day popular culture, can be read as a response to the sustainability of

ever-ongoing global consumer capitalism, as in it the majority of the population gets turned into flesh-heating creatures, that begin to quite literally consume the rest of the world. Additionally, it has been pointed out that the zombie itself can stand as a metaphor for neoliberal capitalist subjectivity, representing lack of free will or true individualism, which only makes the social commentary offered by the contemporary zombie apocalypse more effective (Lauro & Embry 2008).

Even in the often very violent zombie apocalypse, there is still usually some enduring hope that the world could be mended, as the survivors struggle for a better existence. Indeed, the contemporary postapocalypse is perhaps more ambivalent than ever before. In these representations of the postapocalypse, some issues of the modern world are solved, but new problems arise to complicate what could otherwise be a new beginning. In *The Road* for example, what could otherwise be a return to a pre-modern life is constantly interrupted by the fact that the environment itself has become hostile and virtually inhabitable. Yet, such as is the case with the devastated environment in McCarthy's novel, which has often been read as an apocalyptic escalation of the environmental crisis, these issues in the postapocalyptic world are generally not completely new issues, but rather ones that existed in some form even before the end of the world.

Doyle approaches these sources of ambivalence in postapocalyptic narratives by pointing out how the contemporary postapocalyptic in particular is nearly completely based on refusing the idea of apocalyptic revelation, and by doing so it emphasises that the world can only ever be transformed, not replaced. Furthermore, she argues that if apocalypticism has traditionally represented some grand culmination of human issues, the postapocalyptic constantly undermines this by showing that there are no ultimate solutions to these issues. Because postapocalyptic fiction avoids revelation, the narratives present in it are above all about "survival, witness and change", offering very little in terms of "redemption and

transcendence" (100-101). The ambivalence in the postapocalyptic narratives then serves as a constant reminder that there are no grand solutions to mankind's wicked problems, such as the environmental crisis, and that the future is always dependent on the present day.

In addition to refusing any revelatory change in the world, postapocalyptic fiction also often avoids explaining exactly how the end of the world came to be. What is from the reader's point of view a speculative future is the fictional world's reality, whereas details of the pre-apocalypse past of the fictional setting are often left to rely on interpretation. Postapocalyptic fiction then does not necessarily ask its readers the question "what if", but rather "what happened". Doyle points out that in order to make sense of how the apocalypse came to be, readers of postapocalyptic fiction must consider both meanings found in the text, and in their own historical context (104). As such, postapocalyptic fiction can employ a degree of real world apocalypticism, by making its readers consult their pre-existing catalogues of ways for the world to end. However, because it largely avoids the tragic event of apocalypse, postapocalyptic fiction can offer a slightly less intimidating way to approach the kind of matters at the root of apocalypticism, such as the concern for sustainability of human life that is behind environmental apocalypticism.

The postapocalypse is also interesting from an ecocritical point of view in how it presents the complicated relationship between culture and nature. In postapocalyptic fiction, either one of these, and often both are changed in some significant manner. This causes new kinds of interesting narrative spaces to arise, as postapocalyptic fiction may include settings such as ruins of cities overgrown with trees decades after the end of the world, or a world transformed by ecological disaster, in which natural resources are extremely scarce. The postapocalyptic also often offers a version of a return to the natural world, although the state of the natural environment may vary. When considered from this perspective, the postapocalyptic may not be too far removed from the pastoral, as both are genres or modes of

writing that have changed throughout history, but they have always more or less been about responding to changes in society in a manner that is topical to the historical context. Similar to the pastoral, the postapocalyptic can also be seen to contain a discourse of retreat and a nostalgic desire for a pre-modern, pre-urban existence.

2.5 The Pastoral and its Effects on Environmental Thought

Reading and imagining the descriptions of the predominantly dead and ash-covered postapocalyptic landscapes in *The Road* is unlikely to directly invoke an idea of what might generally be considered pastoral writing. Yet, reading the desolate environment simply as it is, and not attempting to imagine what it perhaps used to be like, may prove to be difficult. The ruined and dead landscapes seem not only aesthetically, but fundamentally wrong, because they do not match the kind of ideal representation of nature that has been deeply ingrained in western culture. At the same time, *The Road* is not merely an elegy lamenting the death of nature, because the novel places a strong emphasis on the human element by portraying how people are still clinging onto the devastated world. While perhaps not pastoral writing in the traditional sense, the idea of a return to nature after a fall of modernity is central to *The Road*, and although the reality of this denatured world is no Arcadia, there is a strong sense of nostalgic longing for the past constantly present in the novel, resembling a utopian desire for a world that is whole and intact. It is in the ways that this vision of utopia transcends the novel, where it offers its most profound environmental message, the decoding of which calls for an analysis that acknowledges the presence of pastoral idealism and goes beyond it with the environmental consciousness of the current age in mind.

Discussing the pastoral in a modern context can be a problematic affair, mainly due to the long history of the literary tradition, and the relatively short history of perceiving the environment as an existing problem, together with the increasingly complicated process of

drawing borders between what is culture and what is nature. Terry Gifford, a critic and literary theorist who has written a great deal about the subject, and whose progressive notions regarding the pastoral I am utilising in this thesis, explains that the pastoral in modern context can be understood in three distinct ways (*Pastoral* 1). The meaning of the pastoral is to consider it as a literary genre, which has traditionally featured shepherds or other people living simple lives within the natural world. This manner of pastoral writing, which provides an audience with a temporary retreat to nature and a return from it with something that their urban lives could perhaps be missing, has its roots in classical poetry and Renaissance drama, but its influence can also be found in novels (Gifford, *Pastoral* 1). In addition to this, Gifford explains that pastoral can also be discussed in a broader sense, in which it refers to any literature, where some form of contrast between the country and the urban is more or less prominently present, and in which elements of the former are usually represented in a more positive manner. In this second use of the term, it is primarily these thematic elements that make writing pastoral (*Pastoral* 2).

The third, more contemporary use of pastoral differs from the previous examples, and it has a somewhat subversive meaning. Gifford notes that the term pastoral can also be employed to attach a dismissive, negative value to writing, in the sense that such writing can be seen to represent idealised or simplified descriptions of natural or rural existence by conveniently framing out ecological issues, and thus presenting a skewed, pastoralised reality. As Gifford phrases it, in this sense of the pastoral, "the difference between the literary representation of nature and the material reality would be judged to be intolerable by the criteria of ecological concern" (*Pastoral* 2). Although these views regarding the pastoral may be tied to the increased ecological awareness of the modern day, it is important to note that pastoral representations have never been completely without issues. An example of this would be what Buell calls the "aesthetics of the not-there", which has likely been present in pastoral writing

for centuries. In this type of pastoralised representation, a scene may be described as more ideal and closer to the pastoral idea of nature than it really is, either by importing elements from another place or leaving out something that would detract from the naturalness of the landscape (*Environmental Imagination* 68).

The significant difference between the ways pastoral can be approached explains why its position in the present day can be considered a "deeply suspect one" (Gifford, *Pastoral* 147). Furthermore, Gifford points out that a discussion about whether the pastoral is even relevant anymore has been brought up, as the increasingly complicated border between the country and the city has led critics to claim that pastoral writing has been all but meaningless since late nineteenth century (*Pastoral* 3). Yet, even if traditional pastoral is dead, its influence certainly lives on. Buell, who discusses the pastoral in relation to its effects on environmental imagination, claims that "pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without". What Buell refers to as pastoralism is an ideological construct that affects the view and evaluation of the environment to this day, based on the pastoral tradition and its idealisation of nature. Buell's stance towards this pastoral ideology is not an entirely negative one, as he notes that it is both necessary for, but is at the same time also obstructing the development of what he calls "a mature environmental aesthetics", which could offer a more inclusive, less anthropocentric perception of the environment (*Environmental Imagination* 32-33). Garrard echoes this sentiment by noting that "No other trope is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, or so deeply problematic for environmentalism" than the pastoral (33). The attitudes of both Buell and Garrard reflect the notion that the ideological effects of pastoral are simply too deeply ingrained in thought and language that they could be simply replaced in favour of new environmental ethics.

A significant problem when attempting to define the pastoral has to do with how the relationship between culture and nature is dynamic and constantly being redefined. A modern-

day pastoral would almost inevitably not rely on similar attitudes towards nature as historical examples of the genre. In his study on the pastoral ideal in American context, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), which could be considered a central proto-ecocritical text, Leo Marx discusses two kinds of pastoral: sentimental pastoral, which embodies the traditional idyllic representation of nature, and complex pastoral, which is could perhaps be described as being more grounded in reality, including even the less idyllic parts of existence (5). Central to Marx's notion of complex pastoral is the existence of a counterforce, such as the machine, that complicates the pastoral representation by effectively interrupting what would be an otherwise idyllic scene (25). Complex pastoral then differs from sentimental pastoral in that it can adapt to the possible intrusion to the pastoral scene, and change according to it.

For Marx, who examines the history of the pastoral in America, this counterforce is present in the form of the locomotive, which stands as a metonymical representation of industrialisation, but he also suggests that the counterforce itself is dynamic, and would likely take new forms tied to cultural and technological development (354). Buell seems to agree that the relationship between cultural development and our concept of nature has a complicating effect on pastoral writing, noting that the increased possibility of an "Environmental holocaust" spawning the "contemporary tradition of environmental apocalypse literature" can be considered an example of this (*Environmental Imagination* 51). With this line of thinking, a novel such as *The Road* can be seen as an extreme type of complex pastoral, where the disruptive or complicating effect of the ecocide is brought to the foreground. In this case, the counterforce does not even have to be something that can be seen in direct opposition to nature, such as technology or culture. Instead, a modern-day pastoral counterforce could very well be the reader's awareness of the environment as an issue.

A similar idea of progression in pastoral orientation can be observed in Cormac McCarthy's writing. In his study of the pastoral in McCarthy's novels, Georg Guillemin traces

an evolution through "traditional pastoralism in *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) to the wilderness turn in *Child of God* (1973), and from the anti-pastoralism of *Outer Dark* (1968) to the negative biocentrism of *Blood Meridian* (1985) and finally to the ecopastoralism of the Border Trilogy" (3). What Guillemin calls ecopastoralism, is a more ecocentrically oriented, "inclusive and holistic" form of pastoral writing that is according to him a constant presence in McCarthy's novels, becoming even more prominently present in the later works (15). Guillemin argues that "McCarthy's pastoralism is ecopastoral not just because it respects the ecological equality of all creatures and favors undomesticated nature over agricultural land, but, moreover, because it equates the external wilderness of nature with the social wilderness of the city and the internal wilderness of the human mind" (13).

Although Guillemin's analysis of the pastoral in McCarthy's works precedes the publication of *The Road*, the novel certainly continues the trend towards ecopastoral thought by offering an even more prominently holistic view on the environment and the human mind. I find it hard to disagree with Andrew Estes when he states that this ecopastoralism is perhaps best realised in *The Road* out of all of McCarthy's works, because the "dissolution of the old dichotomy between civilization and wilderness" effectively foregrounds the ecocentric view on the relationship between humans and the environment (103). While the way the environment and its effects on human nature are depicted in *The Road* definitely stands as a darker turn in McCarthy's writing – which was never all that cheerful to begin with – the turn itself is perhaps not a completely unexpected one, but one that reflects the direction of pastoral thinking in relation to the environmental discourse.

2.6 Towards a Post-Pastoral Theory of Literature

At this point, it should be clear just how complex pastoral can get. The idea of simple literature about the simplicity of the countryside seems about as distant of a concept as the reality of such

existence. To ecocritics, the pastoral presents a problem that does not appear to invite a single solution. Garrard, for instance, approaches the issue by turning towards scientific ecological discourse, in what he calls "pastoral ecology". He explains that "the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies" is central to both pastoral thought, and the development of ecological ideas (56). However, modern ecological theories no longer rely on concepts where ecosystems are building towards stable equilibria, as they tend to lean towards the relative unpredictability of chaos theory (Garrard 57-58). Thus, Garrard looks towards a development where the perceiving, writing and reading the environment too, with the help of ecological thought, can outgrow this "core pastoral inflection" (56). In this aspect, Garrard's pastoral ecology resembles Buell's notion of "mature environmental aesthetics", in the sense that he also articulates the maturing influence of ecocriticism as "ecocentric repossession of pastoral" (*Environmental Imagination* 32).

Gifford on the other hand is more reluctant to dismiss the pastoral as an outdated concept that might be phased away in an ecological paradigm shift. He points out how the three approaches to pastoral, "the literary convention, literature of the countryside and the pejorative idealisation", can often overlap in contemporary writing, which to him seems to suggest an evolution of the genre rather than its obsolescence (*Pastoral* 146). Gifford would thus instead look toward writing that has "gone beyond the traditional conventions of the pastoral and the anti-pastoral in an alternative 'post-pastoral' vision" (*Pastoral* 4). Gifford's post-pastoral is therefore *post* in a meaning that includes elements from the pastoral convention, while also considering them in the light of ecological ideas. In this aspect, Gifford's post-pastoral closely resembles what Guillemin calls ecopastoral, as it also features a movement towards holism and inclusivity through "a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human" (*Pastoral* 148). Although the term *post-pastoral* has not as of yet become widely used, I find that the theoretical perspective is fitting for an analysis of *The Road,* as it takes into consideration the

environmental discourse while being aware of how the human relationship with the environment has been historically represented. In this respect, it is not at all surprising that Gifford in a more recent article uses *The Road* as his primary example for applying the theory to fictional writing.

To formulate his post-pastoral theory, Gifford presents a set of six defining qualities that can be present in post-pastoral writing, although he notes that all six of the features "will be found together in one remarkable text only rarely, but they will all be a part of the vision represented in the best work of a post-pastoral writer" (*Pastoral* 150). Most of these qualities that define the post-pastoral vision are related to traditional features of pastoral writing, but the post-pastoral approach involves in some way reversing the anthropocentric and idealising vision to encompass an ecocentric and often humbling view of the natural world. These qualities, or rather the ways of reading they point towards, are central to my analysis of *The Road*, which I will be considering a post-pastoral text. Although I will not be following these features as a checklist, but rather using them as basis for my reading and analysis of *The Road*, I will introduce them here in the same order as Gifford does in his book *Pastoral*.

The first, fundamental quality of post-pastoral writing is its ability to instil "awe in the attention to the natural world" that is not based on an idealised view of nature, but should rather stem from respect towards to the holistic complexity of the environment. Such aesthetics of nature can introduce a humbling effect, which may point the reader to consider mankind's hubris in relation to the environment (*Pastoral* 151-153). An emphasis on the terrible side of nature in contrast to a picturesque representation would serve as an example of this. In this manner, the awe towards nature resembles the idea of the sublime, although the emphasis is on it being a result of a better understanding of the natural world as complex ecological processes, rather than focusing on aesthetics. This type of awe in respect to the harshness and indifference of the denatured world is often present in *The Road,* as the novel constantly serves as a reminder

of just how much human beings ultimately rely on the environment, especially if civilisation for whatever reason reaches its end.

Gifford's second post-pastoral quality involves the recognition of the balance of the creative-destructive processes that define nature, and to a large extent human relationship with the environment. This second quality follows the same rhetoric of humbling as the first one, in the sense that considering the environment a dynamic system that is equally positive and negative can lead towards a more ecocentric orientation. Gifford notes that the death process in particular is prominently featured in literature, and a post-pastoral text would be able to present death in a manner that goes beyond the negative aspect. Although, he also points out that notions such as all destruction ultimately being creation are problematic, because they are too close to "pastoral complacency" by overly emphasising the positive side of things (*Pastoral* 153-155). In *The Road*, recognition of the balance in creative-destructive processes is perhaps best realised in its absence, as the post-apocalyptic world no longer functions in a harmonious, dynamic manner, which in turn leads to an emphasis of the destructive side of existence, which is also reflected through the constant contemplation of death and suicide in the novel's narrative.

The third quality is the recognition "that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature", and its implications (*Pastoral* 156). The idea that place and space matter, and that the state of the environment is reflected on the human psyche is certainly not new, and this third quality considers how literature portrays this relationship between the landscape and the mind. This is perhaps one of the features that is most obvious in *The Road*, as in it, the state of human despair mirrors the state of the environment, and it is a central device for creating the post-apocalyptic ambience. The fourth quality continues with the comparison of inner and outer nature and extends it to culture, by conveying "an awareness of both nature as culture and of culture as nature". Instead of seeing nature and culture as a clear dichotomy,

post-pastoral literature accepts the idea that nature is a cultural construction as much as culture is natural, which may for example be realised through the functions of language as something in-between (*Pastoral* 161-162). *The Road* in particular often portrays the world in such a way that makes a clear line between nature and culture even more difficult to perceive, and the language and textual elements of the novel emphasise this further.

The fifth quality of post-pastoral writing is that it may lead towards a realisation about the species' collective responsibility regarding the environment. As Gifford points out, it is then consciousness, which arguably sets humans apart from nature in the first place, that may also enable us to develop an environmental conscience, once again leading to a humbling effect (*Pastoral* 163-164). The sixth quality continues with a similar line of thinking but employs an ecofeminist perspective, as it is found in literature that in some way points out how the exploitation of the environment is based on the same ideas as the exploitation of women and minorities (*Pastoral* 164-165). These last two qualities of the post-pastoral are also present in *The Road*, as the novel does often at least implicitly suggest that the unity of the human species is not a completely separate issue from the well-being of the environment.

3. The Environmental Postapocalypse

In the first half of my analysis I focus on exploring the main aspects of *The Road* that make it possible to so readily designate it as an environmental text. This part of my analysis largely revolves around the postapocalyptic context of the novel, as the apocalypse is arguably the single most important signifier in it – both environmentally and in general. That is not to say there are no environmental aspects to the novel that could be examined regardless of the apocalyptic context. However, the significance of the apocalypse as the singularly most powerful metaphor in environmental discourse gives it a certain semiotic gravity, which would also make it rather difficult to examine any meanings in the novel completely separate from it.

I begin on a broader textual level, exploring how the postapocalyptic environments in the novel are presented with a certain narrative distance, with a constant melancholic emphasis on the universal loss of things. This grey and cold postapocalyptic ambience alone could very well be enough to mark the novel as environmental, not only because it elegises the dying world, but because it reveals the artificial nature of categories such as culture and nature by presenting a world unified in its death. I then move on to consider the apocalypse itself, in particular how the novel's representation of the end of the world relates to apocalypticism in the environmental discourse. The manner in how the apocalyptic event in *The Road* is made ambiguous is also significant, as it leaves the postapocalypse as the only source of answers regarding what happened to the world.

After considering the representation of both the apocalypse and the postapocalypse, I draw a connection between the two by presenting an argument for how fire acts as the novel's central environmental metaphor, one that connects the reasons of the apocalypse to its visible aftermath. This idea of a world consumed by fire also contains the novel's most profound environmental message, as the representation of fire points towards it having anthropogenic rather than natural origins. The final, but certainly not the least important section of this chapter

explores how the novel's portrayal of humans is particularly ecocentric, as its postapocalyptic world without animals or nature depicts humans as ecologically situated beings dependent on the environment.

3.1 A World Revealed in its Death

Like many literary works that could be classified as postapocalyptic fiction, *The Road* makes it very clear that the world it depicts is in its current state very different from how it used to be. From the very beginning, the novel's melancholic narrative voice together with its minimalistic narrative set the mood for a bleak postapocalyptic ambiance dominated by emptiness and hopelessness. Although the story takes place several years after an implied catastrophic event, the narrator's tone suggests that its effects on both the environment and human civilisation are final and permanent:

> The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. (11)

The world in its entirety has been consumed by fire, its constituents reduced to ashes drifting aimlessly across the emptiness. In a metaphorical sense, the ashes also represent the collective remnants of the modern world: things that have become useless or meaningless after having been removed from their context, that now serve as reminders of the world that was lost. The novel's overall narrative further emphasises how the end of the world has stripped away the meaning of things, as it portrays human life as constant struggle to fulfil the biological necessities for staying alive. Focusing on the journey of a father and son through postapocalyptic America, *The Road* employs a poetics of lifelessness to paint a horrifying picture of a possible future that serves as a reminder of the relative frailty of the planetary ecosystem.

In postapocalyptic narratives, the apocalypse is often explored through what it means to the human characters who have experienced life both before and after the end of the world. As Doyle points out, this aspect of postapocalyptic fiction provides the readers with a defamiliarised version of the world, which exists as a space for exploring real-world issues that are revealed by the postapocalyptic context (103). The attitudes towards the end of the world may then vary greatly, as they are examined through a human perspective. If characters in a text view the apocalypse as an opportunity to start over, it may become easier to read and consider the postapocalypse as emancipation from modern society and its issues, no matter how horrible the actual apocalyptic event was. In this regard *The Road* differs from most postapocalyptic fiction, as McCarthy's vision of the end of the world and life after it is presented in an overwhelmingly negative tone, full of loss and regret, with no possibility for redemption.

This feeling of overwhelming melancholia is further accentuated by the narrative voice of the novel, which presents the ruined world in a coldly objective tone by maintaining a certain distance to the characters and their plight. The characters are narrated primarily through their actions and words, and as most of these focus on the immediacy of staying alive, there is very little time to contemplate the end of the world from a human point of view. Although the narration is at least partially focalised through the man and his thoughts, even flashbacks or dreams relating to his past before the apocalypse are viewed from an external observer's point of view. The apocalypse then remains a topic that is presented primarily through the underlying tones of the narration, rather than being something that is brought forward explicitly through human thought or discourse.

Although *The Road* differs from McCarthy's previous works regarding its subject matter, the narrative voice and vision still follow the author's established style. Georg Guillemin notes that a constant presence of melancholia is a hallmark of McCarthy's narrative

technique: one that the author uses to establish distance between the narrative voice and the events, to the point that "melancholia itself seems to narrate the novels" (3). Guillemin further emphasises how:

> In discussing McCarthy's aesthetic, it is essential to note that the melancholia underlying the narrative process does not originate in pastoral nostalgia. On the contrary, the pastoral theme of loss seems chosen as a suitable articulation of melancholia as such. Melancholia appears in McCarthy's writings in the form of an obsession with death or mortality, as well as in a consistent maintenance of narrative distance. Such melancholy distancing, understood as a time-honored literary device, originates in the biblical image of the agonized prophet on the hill who watches the world from afar on its course toward ruin. (6)

In *The Road,* McCarthy takes the focus on loss and mortality even further, as the postapocalyptic setting allows him to present the entirety of the environment as dead or dying. Claire Curtis compares the novel to the author's earlier works by stating how it "follows a trajectory of increasing nihilism in McCarthy's work" (20). In *The Road,* the pastoral theme, in the sense that Guillemin describes its presence in McCarthy's previous novels: "as the principal quest for harmony in a better world", is now only present as a lingering feeling that any possibility for such existence has been permanently lost (3).

The melancholic narration also presents the postapocalyptic world in a way that pays close attention to even the most insignificant detail in the novel's environments, while simultaneously remaining coldly indifferent towards the human aspects of the world. The novel's narrator exhibits almost no empathy towards the remains of human societies or individuals, as their hopeless existence seems no more important than any other observation about the postapocalyptic world. This gives the narration a sense of perspective and distance that often makes it seem like the novel is being narrated by the voice of the dying world itself. As such, due to its distant and unsympathetic disposition towards human plights, the narrative style also encourages reading *The Road* through an environmental focus, in which the sights that lie along the road, and what they may say about the potential future of the environment are perhaps even more meaningful than the story focusing on the human characters.

When it comes to the environment, the overall tone of representation is already established in the novel's beginning scene, in which the man wakes up surrounded by the cold and dark world:

> When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. (3)

McCarthy's bleak vision of the postapocalypse is realised through a poetics that emphasises the coldness and lifelessness of the world by focusing on how grey and faded everything is. The environments themselves are covered in grey ash, and the ash-filled atmosphere only lets sparse sunlight through. Chris Danta, who approaches the postapocalypse in the novel through what he calls "the poetics of gray", notes that the presence of grey and the absence of other colours is so pronounced that "it is impossible to read *The Road* without noticing how gray everything looks" (10). To Danta, the poetics of grey in *The Road* represents the poetics of the postapocalypse, as it communicates both the "ecological glaucoma" of witnessing the irreparably damaged and fading world, and the "mortality of concepts and forms" as all objects and environments blend into a uniformly grey existence without a meaningful context to shed light on them (11 , 16).

The overwhelming greyness of things is a nearly constant presence in the novel, as McCarthy consistently uses the effect to begin sections of text, often in order to introduce a new locale or event while simultaneously maintaining the novel's postapocalyptic atmosphere. A brief section early on in the story begins with the sentence: "He sat by a gray window in the gray light in an abandoned house in the late afternoon and read old newspapers while the boy slept" (28). Here the repetition of the adjective *grey* draws attention to the absolute bleakness of the world, as not only is the light grey, but the window it passes through as well. The idea of reading old newspapers only serves to emphasise this feeling, as it is perhaps one of the *greyest* actions imaginable in the postapocalyptic context. After all, the newspapers themselves

would be worn out – the words written on their pages describing things that now only existed as greyed out versions of what they used to be, or solely in the fading out memories of the man. This example also shows that the poetics of grey in *The Road* are not realised only through descriptions of objects or environments, but through actions as well.

Although the idea of everything being grey and fading is central to the poetics of the postapocalypse in the novel, the effect would be only partially realised without a continuous emphasis on how physically cold the world truly is. In *The Road*, cold and grey are the two adjectives that drive the melancholic mood of the novel, and they often appear so that their presence complements each other. A good example of this is how the section headed by the rather grey sentence discussed in the previous paragraph is immediately followed by a section of text headed by a similarly cold sentence: "They squatted in the road and ate cold rice and cold beans that they'd cooked days ago" (29). Here it is the adjective *cold* that is in turn repeated to emphasise the harsh physical reality of the postapocalyptic world. The actions described in this sentence further emphasise the postapocalyptic condition, as they communicate both a lack of shelter and nourishment in the cold world. The phrase "squatted in the road" is particularly expressive, as the preposition used makes it seem like the phrase simultaneously communicates two meanings of the verb. It is as if the man and his son were in a squatting position as they had absolutely nothing to sit on, while they were also squatting in the road itself due to having absolutely no shelter to occupy. The way these ideas are communicated in a very minimalistic way – with one very economic verb phrase – only emphasises the empty atmosphere and loss of meaning.

These two sentences and the short sections of text they introduce are separated by an unspecified amount of time and distance. Most of *The Road* follows this type of structure, in which events are presented in loose chronological order with very few temporal and spatial references. The only real indicators of the passing of time or distance spent on the road are the

need for shelter or fire for the night, and running out of food. The world remaining grey and cold then seems to be one of the few constant factors in McCarthy's otherwise disjointed narrative. Same goes for the environments in the novel, as *where* they are seems to always be secondary to *how* they are. A garden of wilting and withering apple trees, a thoroughly ransacked convenience store, or the slowly rusting hulk of a long-abandoned train all appear in the same greyed out manner, equally devoid of life and filled with a lingering sense of loss of meaning. It is this greyness of things, and the coldness of the world that they exist in, that fully communicates the postapocalyptic environment in *The Road*.

The most pervasive aspect of this universal greyness and coldness is that it makes the environment in the novel appear consistent and homogeneous in a manner that can be quite unnerving, as there truly seems to be no hope left for the postapocalyptic wasteland. This uniform emptiness of the postapocalypse effectively heralds the realisation of how ephemeral human culture with all its complexities ultimately is. Perhaps the most unsettling aspect about this bleak world is that it is not at all unimaginable to the contemporary reader. Were it not for the prevalence of apocalyptic notions in environmental rhetoric over the past decades, McCarthy's emphasis on the collective mortality of the world, the human beings living in it, and even their very ideas, could be seen purely as exercise in literary nihilism. As it stands however, the cold and grey world remains a possible, perhaps even a likely future, which in turn effectively foregrounds what the novel says about the environment in the real world.

As a postapocalyptic text, *The Road* does not offer a revelation about the world after the end, but it may instead reveal things about the present-day world. The grey and cold postapocalypse exposes the relative vulnerability of our everyday life by illustrating how everything in the world is equally dependant on seemingly simple and abundant things such as light and warmth. Take these very basic things away, and all the things in the world eventually turn into the same ashes, whether they are part of the natural world, cultural objects or even

human emotions. The irony in this notion is that in order to realise the fragility of the extremely complex modern world, it has to first be witnessed in ruins and pieces. As Danta suggests, the grey postapocalypse in *The Road* may allow us to see something more profound in the present world, as he notes that "For McCarthy, it is the dimming away of the object – its growing faint from grayness – that enables us, at last, to see how it was made" (24). In *The Road*, the ecological idea of the interconnectedness of all things is constantly present in how absolutely everything in the world is dying in a similar manner. As such, the uniformly devastated postapocalyptic vision may also offer deeper insight into the ecological realities facing the modern world.

3.2 Interpreting the Apocalypse

While its postapocalyptic mood is most prominently conveyed through an emphasis on how grey and cold the world is, there are also visible physical signs of the actual apocalyptic event in the landscapes of *The Road*. The novel's representation of the postapocalyptic environment becomes fully realised not only through scenes depicting the lifeless state of the world, but also in how these scenes are often complemented with imagery of devastation by fire that signifies the apocalypse itself. The following passage from early on in the novel is a good example of how the apocalypse is present in the environment, as in it the narrator paints a scene in which an image of the countryside is contrasted with signs of both destruction and abandonment:

> On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered. (8)

If we were to look beyond the fact that everything in the scene is charred and burned, the landscape under the layer of destruction, with a house in a clearing near a river valley and

meadowlands could evoke an image of an ideal American countryside. This image with its references to roadworks, billboards and motels is not quite idyllic, but far enough removed from urban imagery to qualify as a type of modern pastoral. Although the postapocalyptic version of the scene is blackened and burned, it is not so to the point that the original pre-apocalypse scene becomes unimaginable. Additionally, the way the burned environment is described makes it seem as if the fire was intensely focused on this particular scene or image, with the location itself described as a "stark black burn" with burned and charred things around it, but further along the road the road "everything as it once had been save faded and weathered" (8). This further accentuates the juxtaposition of relatively idyllic elements and the image of them having been consumed violently in fire, which is no doubt intentional, as such relatable environments being destroyed is quite effective at emphasising the environmental significance of the apocalypse.

Although the burned environments and the ash-filled air point towards a great fire that ravaged across the land, *The Road* offers very few details regarding the exact nature of the apocalypse, as what happened to the world and the people in it is only ever hinted at. The most conclusive clues are in one of the man's past flashbacks, which seems to suggest that the end of the world happened in one single event on a fateful night: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" followed by "A dull rose glow in the windowglass." (52). Although the doomsday clock did not quite stop at midnight, the sounds and the lights in the sky seem to initially point towards nuclear devastation as the cause of the end of the world. However, as Paul Patton observes, this explanation is rather problematic as there is absolutely no mention of the dangers of radiation present in the novel (132). While there are characters wearing crude masks and other protective equipment due to the ash-filled air, the environment is never described as irradiated, only burned. With McCarthy's attention to detail regarding the harshness of his postapocalyptic world, such an omission of dangerous

radiation seems highly unlikely. Although the cold and lightless world certainly seems inspired by the idea of nuclear winter, the absence of dangerous background radiation makes nuclear devastation an unsatisfactory answer to the nature of the apocalypse.

Patton suggests that other popular doomsday scenarios such as global warming or asteroid impact are "equally plausible", as they are capable of creating the kind of cold and lightless Earth depicted in the novel (132). The plausibility of these scenarios is supported by the fact that palaeontologists generally believe that such scenarios have already contributed to three mass extinction events in the planet's geological history (Broswimmer 1-2). As environmental apocalypticism relies on theoretical possibility, these scenarios are a good fit for apocalyptic fiction. Furthermore, Milner et al. note that the representation of extreme climate change in contemporary fiction tend to tends to focus on one of three major tropes: ice, fire or flood (17).

Hollywood for instance has used these kind of scenarios of extreme climate change as basis for more or less scientifically accurate disaster films that all represent different outlines of environmental apocalypse. In both *Deep Impact* (1998) and *2012* (2009) the world faces a rather biblical flood, in the former as a result of an impact of a comet, and in the latter due to solar radiation turning the planet's core into a giant microwave oven. In *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), the world faces an instant and global ice age – ironically enough, as a result of global warming. However, while these types of scenarios are scientifically plausible to a degree, and certainly capable of wiping out most life on the planet, the problem with them in relation to the apocalypse in *The Road* is that none of them explain how the world is practically incinerated, followed by a nuclear winter. Although fire is listed as one of the three tropes of extreme climate change by Milner et al., the kind of scenarios they are referring to originate from a rise in temperature rather than representing the kind of incineration on global scale that seems to have happened in *The Road* (17)

It would then seem that the end of the world in the novel is almost impossible to define or explain by reducing it to mechanical components. It is as if the apocalypse had been deliberately crafted to resist this kind of deconstruction of meaning in order to reinforce its greater metaphorical significance. The one single sentence that perfectly encapsulates the end of the world in the novel – "The clocks stopped at 1:17" – is thoroughly metaphorical, as it refers to the fact that time stopped meaning anything rather than to the actual timepieces. The time reference is another noteworthy detail, as the number 117 also appears in McCarthy's previous novel *No Country for Old Men* (2005) as the number of a motel room that houses a brutal massacre. This connection has of course led McCarthy's readers to seek meaning associated to the number in various systems of signs: such as bible verses, different calendars and numerology.

Yet, the number remains largely ambiguous, with no conclusive answer as to what it represents. When interviewed by Oprah Winfrey the year after the publication of *The Road*, McCarthy stated that 117 was just a number stuck in his head that had no particular significance. He continued by stating that: "I'm sure it's a reference to something – I just don't know what it is, so I'm like the reader [my transcription]" ("Oprah's Book Club"). It would then seem that the number alludes to ambiguity itself by appearing significant while resisting interpretation, and as such it seems a perfect fit for representing the end of the world. Just as the number 117 remains unexplained while in sight of the reader, so does the apocalypse linger in the background of the *The Road* – always present but never approached via exposition.

Critics have largely regarded the ambiguity of the novel's representation of the apocalypse as something that marks the event itself as either unimportant or incomprehensible. Patton for example argues that the apocalypse in the novel represents a kind of "hermeneutical sublime", a "pure event" that is not extrapolated from already happened events but is instead "something that we would not see coming and that will have been so unexpected and

unidentifiable that we cannot even be sure what it was that took place" (133-137). Danta on the other hand suggests that the apocalypse itself is purposefully made vague in order to emphasise the postapocalypse, as he claims that "McCarthy is more concerned to trace the consequences than he is to identify the cause of the catastrophe" (11). For Mark Steven, the apocalypse also remains an unexplained event, the only purpose of which is to bring forth a new world that differs radically from the present one (71-72). What is common to these readings is that they treat the inexplicability of the apocalypse primarily as a literary device that enables the focus to be shifted to the postapocalypse and the meanings it represents. For Patton the postapocalypse allows for an exploration of human nature and morality, for Danta it presents narrative space for existential consideration of things such as colours and ideas, whereas for Steven the late world serves as a mirror for exploring the worldlessness of late modern existence.

Even environmentalist readings can treat the exact mechanisms of the actual apocalyptic event as ambiguous and unimportant, as Hannah Stark does by pointing out that leaving a narrative gap between the pre-apocalyptic world and the postapocalypse can offer a more effective environmental message than if the cause of the apocalypse was clearly explained. Stark argues that because the postapocalyptic environment in *The Road* reads "literally as a depiction of climate change", the ambiguous apocalyptic event then comes to stand "as an allegorical projection of the anxieties present in the cultural zeitgeist, filtered through climate change discourse" (73). That is, because the apocalypse is never explained, the gap it represents can be filled in by the readers, and as Stark points out, *The Road* is full of allusions to phenomena such as "extreme weather events, deforestation, species' extinction, and food shortages", which can make it difficult to resist a reading in which the postapocalyptic world is anything but a direct consequence of human actions (73). Even if the apocalyptic event

itself is unexplainable, the state of the postapocalyptic world may point towards environmental readings of the apocalypse.

3.3 Signs of Anthropogenic Fire

Although the apocalypse in *The Road* may be unexplainable in regard to its exact nature and causes, its representation can also be considered by examining the few central signifiers that seem to be closely associated with the world-ending event itself. On a very basic level McCarthy's entire postapocalyptic vision relies on a relatively simple process: the world has been consumed in fire and is as a result lifeless and cold. Dealing with a complex notion such as the end of the world in this kind of reductionist fashion hearkens back to Robert Frost's well-known poem "Fire and Ice", which also deals with the end of the world in a simplified and compact manner by reducing all its potential causes into a simple duality represented by the elemental forces of fire and ice. Similar to how Frost's poem can be read and expanded far beyond its literal content by analysing the meanings of the multitudes of complex phenomena that are condensed into the conceits of both fire and ice, the ambiguous apocalypse in *The Road* can also be approached by considering the significance of fire as its central metaphor.

Fire is the single most important motif that signifies the apocalypse in *The Road*, as its presence in the novel's ruined and charred environments is so prevalent and emphasised that it would be next to impossible to overlook. The environment appears thoroughly burned in descriptions such as: "the country as far as they could see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste" (14). Many of these landscapes seem positively infernal, and McCarthy's consistent use of expressive yet simple language makes it quite clear that the devastation by fire has been both total and universal. Whether it is "a roadside hamlet burned to nothing" (191), "the blackened quadrants of a burned city" (188) or mountains with "Burnt

forests for miles along the slopes" (29-30), the traces of an all-consuming fire are practically everywhere. All these burned environments seem to point towards a bigger picture of how the environment as a whole has been burned by the same fire. Although there are no real answers as to what actually caused this apocalyptic fire, we may still consider the meaning of the fire itself – that is, to not see fire only as a consequence of the apocalypse, but rather to see it as a symbolic representation of the causes of the end of the world. After all, any reading that regards the postapocalyptic world as a symbol of environmental anxiety would likewise have to see the world so thoroughly marked by fire as a representation of some real-world environmental phenomena.

Because the symbolism of fire is a deeply complex matter, even within the limited environmental context that I consider here, I am only discussing the few very specific meanings that are relevant to fire as a symbol of the apocalypse in *The Road*. Environmental historian Stephen J. Pyne, who has written numerous books on the topic of fire and its history, describes fire in essence as "an environmental presence, an ecological process, and an evolutionary force" that has been present on the planet for over 400 million years (xv). Although fundamentally a natural phenomenon, fire has over the past several thousand years been predominantly tied to human presence in the environment. Pyne argues that perhaps the most important defining trait of human beings, which no other species on the planet possesses, is their ability to light and control fire to an extent (xv). In Greek mythology it was Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, marking the beginning of human civilisation, and according to Pyne, connecting the origin of humanity to the acquisition fire in such a manner is quite a common narrative in origin myths (3). Civilisation has progressed through and with manipulation of fire, starting from simple imitation of natural combustion, followed by the large-scale manipulation of flammable materials with agriculture, and once again changed dramatically with the excavation and consumption of fossil fuels at the dawn of

the industrial revolution (Pyne xvi). Even in the era of highly complex digital technology, all modern aspects of human culture are still fundamentally based and reliant on manipulating and burning the natural resources that powers them.

This ongoing process of harvesting natural resources from the environment at an unsustainable rate and burning them to maintain human culture on a global scale is only one aspect of the ecological issues related to anthropogenic fire. A perhaps even greater environmental concern lies in the implication that any process fundamentally based on harnessing fire may also have decent chance of going wrong or getting out of control at some point. It is after all considerably easier to start a fire than it is to control or extinguish one. Pyne also makes sure to emphasise how mankind's control over fire is not absolute, and as much as fire symbolises progress and development, it also always has a destructive and unpredictable side to it. The great cities of the world may have always represented human progress, but most of them have also witnessed a great fire or two over the years.

This dualistic nature of fire also extends to large-scale environmental metaphors, as both historical and ongoing cultural processes such as agriculture, industrialisation and globalisation can be likened to spreading uncontrollable wildfire that is consuming the environment in its wake. As Pyne points out, the current direction is a particularly worrying one, as "fire appears less as something that results from climate and increasingly as something that shapes climate" (180). A global fire resulting from processes of industrialisation and globalisation is in many ways a more problematic one than the agricultural fires that have shaped natural vegetation into farmland – as although there is certainly smoke in the form of various emissions, there is no easily-perceivable fire. As a result, this global fire is only truly present through theories and discourses of global warming, which do not have quite the same impact as saying that the world is actually burning.

The environmental issues that are related to its derived forms make plain fire itself an effective environmental metaphor: one that is not at all uncommon to see as a symbolic reflection of apocalyptic anxiety. Such reductionist representation of fire benefits from the relative simplicity of a natural phenomenon that is familiar and easy to understand. At the same time, fire also has mystical and sublime qualities to it, as it remains fascinating, unpredictable and terrifying – something that is ultimately never easy to settle with. The scorched environments of *The Road* come to stand as a metonymical representation of the state of the entirety of the environment on its current course, as the novel effectively takes complicated environmental phenomena such as global warming and overpopulation, and condenses their meaning into a single apocalyptic fire.

When asked about his inspiration for *The Road*, McCarthy states that the original idea came to him when he was staying in a hotel in El Paso with his then four-year-old son. He explains how after getting up at night and looking out of the window: "I just had this image of what this town might look like in fifty or a hundred years. I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought about my little boy [my transcription]" ("Oprah's Book Club"). This early image described by the author already contains the same uneasy juxtaposition of civilisation and fire that is present in the finished novel. Both the image that made the author contemplate the future of the world for his son, and the novel inspired by it raise the question about how sustainable the world is for future generations. *The Road* is perhaps the bleakest imaginable depiction of the end, in which the fire of human civilisation has consumed the entire world, and the ruins of mankind and the world they used to inhabit are experienced by a father and son, again signifying the connection between the present and future generations.

Although *The Road* never explicitly refers to human agency as the source of the apocalypse, there are several instances in the novel where the world being on fire is narrated in

conjunction with the collapse of society. One of the man's flashbacks offers a brief glimpse into what happened to people after the world ended:

> People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road… (32-33).

As noted by Heather Hicks, the passage depicts a decline of civilisation in which acts of empathy soon change into a rapid descent towards barbarism and violence, something that is not at all uncommon in postapocalyptic fiction (83). Fire is also notably present in this brief description, but it is in a way that makes it seem more like something that happened as a result of the collapse of society, rather than being the reason behind it. The nearly burning people on the sidewalks suggests that the fires originated from human settlements after the collapse of society rather than raining down from the heavens. Then after a year, the remaining people spread over the land, taking fire with them, and based on the violent state they had regressed into, it is hard to imagine they had any care towards the land they burned in their wake. What happened after is only implied elsewhere in the novel, as the man thinks to himself how there were "No more balefires on the distant ridges" as "the bloodcults must have all consumed one another" (16). At this point the world had already been thoroughly consumed by fire, which may very well have been spread by people after the fall of organised society, rather than having been caused by any disaster or event.

The fall of society and fire also come up when the man thinks back to his wife, and how shortly after the apocalypse they "sat at the window and ate in their robes by candlelight a midnight supper and watched distant cities burn" (59). The scene here bears a resemblance to the image McCarthy described as the original inspiration for the novel: witnessing the last burning ruins of civilisation through a window. The somewhat absurd notion of watching the end of the world while eating supper also manages to create a feeling as if the end of the world is nothing out of ordinary – that it is only an anticipated phase of an ongoing process rather

than an exceptional event. Notably, in the same passage the man's wife, who committed suicide shortly after the apocalyptic event, is described as "A creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end." (59). In the context of the passage, it is quite easy to read this as a reference to the wife, but reading between the lines, the notion may as well apply to all of mankind. In the general context of the novel, this line can quite easily refer to human civilisation, and how the progress of mankind, originating from the harnessing of fire, would eventually come full circle in the ashes of its burning cities.

Another symbolic reference to the end of the world in fire is present in a scene where the father and son are traveling across "a country where firestorms had passed leaving mile on mile of burn", as they come upon countless human corpses burned into the road itself. These remains of people, "half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling", are as if from some hellish vision, or perhaps a warning to anyone passing by (190). There is also some degree of grim irony in how this image of people half-sunken in the oily asphalt bears resemblance to images of animals covered in oil spills after environmental disasters. The boy then asks if these people were trying to get away and why they did not leave the road, to which the man answers: "They couldnt. Everything was on fire." (191). On a symbolic level, these last refugees of a world on fire represent the final generation of humans, as the road they were on stands as a symbol of human progress. These people had no place to flee, as their fate was already decided by those past generations who chose to embark upon this road of seemingly unending progress. The firestorm that caught up to them and burned them alive was then only a matter of time.

Another important aspect that supports reading fire in connection with civilisation has to do with how fire plays a crucial role in surviving the cold and lifeless postapocalypse, and how it is often is referred to as a symbol of humanity by the novel's characters. An old man met on the road directly refers to fire as a symbol of civilised existence as he explains his

wretched appearance by saying: “I’ve not seen a fire in a long time . . . I live like an animal” (172). The most notable and likely the most discussed aspect of fire in the novel is how the man and his son constantly refer to themselves as those who are “carrying the fire”, to separate themselves from the savage cannibals and others who have long since abandoned anything resembling civilised life. Several critics have noted that this inner fire of humanity exhibited by these two exists to balance the novel’s otherwise bleak outlook on existence. Patton (2012) for example argues that the fire the man and his son are carrying represents the human spirit and its innate tendency for morality and spirituality even when there is nothing left of the world. Stephanie Arel (2014) on the other hand considers fire as a symbol of the sacred human body as the vessel of the soul, which the father and son still respect, unlike the cannibals who only treat other humans as a source of food. Common to these interpretations is that fire more or less stands for the exceptionality of the human soul. This inner fire is then very much like the human ability to control physical fire, as they both effectively separate humans from both non-human animals and the material environment.

As such, there is an uneasy duality relating to the nature of humanity in *The Road* that is articulated through its central motif of fire. The actions of the father and son and their compassion towards others symbolises the morality and empathy only humans are capable of, as they often choose to go beyond simply trying to survive. On the other hand the burned environments act as a constant reminder of what other aspects of humanity are capable of. This duality is very much the same one that is at the heart of anthropocentrism – how human rationality simultaneously places humans in the centre of the world while at the same time allowing us to consider whether it is right or wrong. The fact that the world did end in fire in *The Road* is then not necessarily only a warning, but it may also point towards a consideration of alternative environmental ethics in order to prevent such a fate.

Finally, the *The Road* contains several sections that appear as the man's dreamlike visions, but their allegorical nature makes it quite possible to read them as a more of a general message of the novel itself. There is one particular passage that is quite explicit in its environmental message, and in which fire is also in a central role:

> Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy's age. A little older. Watching while they opened up the rocky hillside ground with pick and mattock and brought to light a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number. Collected there for a common warmth. The dull tubes of them beginning to move sluggishly in the cold hard light. Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day. The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers. (188-189)

This passage sets off with an environmental tone right from the beginning, as it describes a group of particularly rough men digging into the earth, leaving no doubt that these people are certainly no conservationists. The entire tone of the passage changes half-way through, as instead of merely mining into the earth for resources, these men begin to burn the creatures found within alive. Burning the snakes is of course as allegorical as the notion that there are snakes living deep within the earth in the first place, and it becomes quite clear that the violence towards the snakes symbolises mankind's general attitude towards the environment.

The way these snakes are violently burned alive by pouring gasoline on them employs the same extended metaphor on how industrialisation, global warming and the mass extinction of species are part of the same great fire in which excavated fossil fuels are burned to maintain civilisation, which consequently contributes in several ways to animal species dying all over the globe. Here, the action is merely simplified but the results are arguably the same. Additionally, how the environment is symbolised by serpents is not only an obvious but also an ironical biblical reference. After all, snakes obviously have no concept of morality, and the fact that they can be thought of as evil points directly at how limited human ethics are when it

comes to the non-human world. The suffering of these creatures is also described in detail as they are gruesomely burned alive, but as there are no screams of pain for the snakes are mute – like the environment – these humans simply watch this obviously horrific event in silence, none of them stopping to question their actions. The fact that this pre-apocalyptic vision is connected to the burned postapocalyptic world only through the conceit of fire underlines the notion that fire is simultaneously both the cause of the apocalypse, and the central signifier in the novel's environmental message.

3.4 Humanity in a Dying World

Up to this point, I have mainly focused on the postapocalyptic world of *The Road* without paying too much attention to its human characters. The reason for this is not limited only to how my primary interest is the environment, but another major contributing factor is how the novel portrays humans as unexceptional beings who are for the most part just another aspect of the its setting – a role that has been traditionally reserved for the environment. Most of the survivors of the apocalypse barely even constitute characters, as they are more akin to "Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland" (28) In addition to these hollow men, McCarthy's postapocalyptic vision is populated by a Mad Max-esque cast of dehumanised cannibalistic killers: murderers, roadagents and marauders, most of whom are only present through vague mentions or observed from a distance. Although the father and son still cling to morality as the one thing that defines who they are, the way the human race is predominantly portrayed as just another species of animals is another major factor that contributes to reading the novel with an environmental focus.

To begin with, the postapocalyptic setting in *The Road* is quite uncharacteristic of the genre, particularly when it comes to what it means to humans, as the novel emphasises the finality of the world rather than presenting it as a place for new possibilities. Claire Curtis even

describes *The Road* as an outlier of the postapocalyptic genre that defies generic expectations to no small degree (18-19). This is because Curtis approaches postapocalyptic texts as narratives about how humans may organise and rebuild a better society after being thrust into a state of nature by the apocalypse (2). *The Road* however presents postapocalypse with almost no remaining nature, which greatly hinders such utopian projects. As Curtis observes, the fact that the only resemblance of organised society in the novel is exhibited by the cannibals who are storing and transporting other humans for food, does not make the notion of rebuilding society a particularly agreeable proposition to begin with (24-25). Curtis ultimately ends up pointing to the lack of natural resource as the reason for why the world is full of people trying to kill and eat each other instead of working together in order to start over, but because her approach is not particularly environmentally oriented, she also largely ignores what this failure of society says about the culture-nature dualism that is rooted in anthropocentric thought (25-26). I would go a step further and argue that the way *The Road* shows the impossibility of society and culture in a world without nature is perhaps the novel's most pronounced environmental message, because it effectively questions the very idea of culture-nature as a binary opposition.

The Road is also rather ecocentrically oriented in how it portrays humans as an ecologically constrained species, rather than presenting them as highly rational beings. In her book *Environmental Culture*, Val Plumwood points towards the emphasis on rationalism that permeates all aspects of our culture as the reason behind the global ecological crisis of modern times (4). According to Plumwood, rational reasoning as our preferred method of understanding the world has also affected our cultural attitudes towards the environment, as human rationality has throughout history been used as an ideological justification to place non-human animals and inanimate nature in the background by emphasising how human beings are "the only real subjectivities and actors in the world" (19). What she is describing is the

anthropocentric notion of categorising the surrounding world as the environment, and rationalist attitudes is according to her what facilitates such a view. A critical attitude towards such rational forms of thought is quite visibly present in *The Road,* both in how the characters in the novel rarely exhibit rationality as a positive trait, and more importantly in how the novel actually points towards the environment instead of the human mind as the source of ideas and language.

When it comes to people in the novel exhibiting rational behaviour, the most rational human beings in the novel are arguably the cannibals, who are ensuring their own survival by enslaving others. In this case acting in a rational manner certainly does not appear as a trait of human exceptionality as much as it does as a convenient excuse to justify the exploitation of others. On the other hand, the man, who is the closest thing to a hero in the novel is implied to be a doctor, or perhaps a scientist based on some of the things he says, most notably when he threatens a man by explaining to him how he would not hear the gunshot before the bullet hit his brain because bullets travel faster than sound, and as such he would no longer have "a frontal lobe and things with names like colliculus and temporal gyrus" (64) to process hearing with. Yet he never exhibits any knowledge above the ordinary, and most of his actions seem guided by survival instinct more than anything, showing that scientific knowledge in particular is not all that useful with no society to apply said knowledge in. This also points to rationalist attitudes being primarily a product of the surrounding culture, rather than some inherent quality of human beings: as with "The frailty of everything revealed at last" (28), humans become just another species of animals surviving primarily on instincts – which is certainly not a novel sentiment to McCarthy, whose works often resonate with such ethos of literary naturalism.

The Road also comments on the relationship between ideas, language and the environment on a deeper level by emphasising how dependant thought is on the external world. This idea itself is in direct opposition to rationalism, which is a philosophical notion of reason

according to which thought exists independent of the world and is merely used to process information about the surrounding world (Blackburn 271). The recurring glimpses into the man's thoughts in particular bring forth this connectedness of the human subjectivity and the surrounding world, as he begins to notice that his mind is becoming affected by the world around him disappearing. While resting with the boy, the man tries "to think of something to say but he could not" (88), and it then occurs to him that this was because the natural world around him was dying:

> The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. (88-89)

This powerful passage communicates how both thought and language cannot exist without the actual physical things in the environment, which in turn emphasises how people may not be as separate or independent of the surrounding world as they may think. The man cannot think of anything to say because his thoughts and the language used to express them are becoming meaningless without objects in the real world: "The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality" (89). Even rational aspects of his thought are being affected by the disappearing environment, as it is not only empirical things such as animals or colours that are disappearing, but also the things he believes to be true – the kind of things that are purely objects of deductive reasoning. It is profoundly ironical how the man's thoughts turn out to be more fragile and more dependent on the external world than he could have thought, further stressing how a focus on rationalist attitudes may prevent people from seeing how reliant they actually are on the non-human world around them.

Finally, a third important aspect where the novel deconstructs the culture/nature dualism is in its representation of humans and animals. Notably, there are no non-human animals left in McCarthy's lifeless postapocalypse. The man still recalls "listening to flocks of migratory birds overhead in that bitter dark" in the early years after the apocalypse but it is

emphasised that “He never heard them again” (53). Humans on the other hand are portrayed as animalistic and feral: the world “populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” and the cities full of “blackened looters who tunnelled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell” (181). As the man holds one of these murderers on gunpoint, he is described to be “Like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes” (63), leaving little doubt just how much humanity was left in these feral people.

With animals gone, the food chain has naturally been reorganised, only this time with people. McCarthy’s postapocalyptic humans range from dangerous predatory animals roaming the wastes to scavenging vermin, relatively harmless but “wretchedlooking beyond description” (195). In contrast to the predatory cannibals, the man and his son are described as peaceful animals, at one point described to be standing in the rain “like farm animals” (20) and later on as “two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover” (130). The boy is portrayed as a particularly vulnerable prey, as at one point the man leaves him to sleep “like some hibernating animal” (98), and later he thinks how he has taught the boy “to lie in the woods like a fawn” (118). Although the animals themselves may be physically gone, their respective places in the ecosystem are filled with different kinds of people, which in turn again emphasises how humans are a part of the environment just as any other animals.

The animal world is also strongly represented in the novel’s environments despite the absence of actual animals. Whether it is things resembling animals, such as “fireblackened boulders like the shapes of bears” (30) or experiences linked to memories like the “lingering odor of cows in the barn” (120), the animal world is consistently referred to in the novel. Kate Marx makes note of this as she argues how *The Road* comments on both the viewing of animals primarily as commodities and the ongoing mass extinction of wild animals by presenting a time that is quite literally “after animals”, and in which the negative space left in their passing is

filled by constant references to them (2). She points out that the novel is full of both descriptions of animal remains in the environment, as well as things that make the man think of animals, which turns into a nostalgic longing for animal life that can perhaps be only realised after their demise (7).

What Marx finds particularly notable is that even despite the fact that the man is starving, the animals he dreams of never appear to him as food, but only as a living part of nature, things that are valuable on their own with no instrumental value attached (6). She takes the only appearance of a living animal as another example of how *The Road* presents a view of the world in which all life is equally valuable. When the man and his son hear a dog barking in the distance, the boy's primary concern is completely unrelated to their own survival, but rather about whether the dog is going to be fine (8). As she points out, the boy who has grown up in this dying world has the ability to value all life equally, unlike anyone who grew up in a world full of living beings (8).

What she does not mention however, which I believe is of equal importance, is that the boy shows exactly the same kind of concern towards human life as well, as he constantly asks his father whether it is possible to avoid hurting others. When the two meet an old man, the boy actually asks his father whether they can keep him, or at least feed him – the kind of thing a child might ask about a vulnerable animal discovered in nature. By putting equal importance on the life of a feral dog and an old man, the boy actually exhibits the kind of purely biocentric ethic that is perhaps possible only for someone who can view the ecosystem without any positional or hierarchical structures attached.

4. Postapocalyptic Pastoral

So far I have explored how *The Road* can be considered an environmental novel, based on its representation of the apocalypse and its likely causes, as well as on its portrayal of a postapocalyptic world. There is another significant aspect to the novel that contributes to its environmental ethos, which stems from how McCarthy's naturalist style interacts with the postapocalyptic aesthetic in presenting a world with little nature left in a manner that still manages to resonate with certain presence of nature. In this chapter, I consider the pastoral aspect of *The Road,* as I explore how the novel portrays the relationship between humans and the natural world through the changed context of the environmental postapocalypse, as well as how this reflects on contemporary environmental thought in a general sense.

I begin by briefly explaining what aspects of *The Road* make it a pastoral text, specifically in the context of the late modern era, in which the idea of a strict division between the human world and the natural world is becoming increasingly problematic, and in which environmental concerns are foregrounded in the public discourse. As such, the majority of my analysis focuses on explaining how *The Road* is a post-pastoral text, based on how it renegotiates the human view of the surrounding world – from the classic idea of nature as a timeless, pastoral place of return, towards a more holistic and ecological view of the environment that encompasses all of its aspects.

4.1 *The Road*: a Pastoral?

As I have mentioned before, *The Road* is likely not the first to come to mind as an example of a pastoral text. A novel about mankind's bleak future in a ravaged landscape may on the contrary seem like the text furthest away from a literary mode or genre that is often thought to be synonymous with idyllic sceneries and a yearning for a return to a simpler past. Yet, at the same time there are distinctly pastoral elements in the novel. Most notably, the way the

narrative is focused on simple down-to-earth life and events is very close to the pastoral mode, even if the postapocalyptic context emphasises life as survival, and makes the retreat from complicated modern life an involuntary one. Furthermore, as a postapocalyptic text, *The Road* is also constantly pointing back towards a lost world and a lost time, and by doing so it often invokes a feeling of pastoral nostalgia.

It may be easier to approach *The Road* from the pastoral angle if we consider that ambivalence regarding what makes a text pastoral seems to be more of a rule rather than an exception when it comes to pastoral criticism. In his book *What is Pastoral?* (1996), Paul Alpers explores the issues with pastoral: how the general idea is seemingly familiar to any academic studying literature, while at the same time it can be almost impossible to point out what makes a text pastoral (8). Alpers underlines the issue by stating how "it sometimes seems as if there are as many versions of pastoral as there are critics and scholars who write about it" (8). The fact that pastoral is one of the oldest literary traditions is what complicates any attempts to define it, as pastoral is essentially about human relationship to the surrounding world, which itself has been changing for at least as long as it has been a subject of literature.

Although his approach does not provide an exhaustive definition for pastoral literature, the way Alpers emphasises pastoral as a mode rather than as a genre is a good starting point (44). By using this definition of mode, as "the literary manifestation, in a given work, not of its attitudes in a loose sense, but of its assumptions about man's nature and situation", Alpers suggests that a pastoral text is one in which the hero's or the characters' relationships towards the surrounding world are presented in a humbling manner, which creates the underlying pastoral attitude for the text (49-50). Other themes in the text can then be examined with this pastoral attitude as a starting point, and as such the pastoral can be seen as a function that enables interpretation of various texts based on this shared mode or attitude, rather than being

a tool for making strict classifications regarding genre or mode, which is something Alpers also emphasises (60).

This definition of the pastoral mode by Alpers already points to underlying themes of environmental consciousness in relation to the pastoral – particularly in how the attitude of the text is affected by the characters' relationship with the surrounding environment. Ken Hiltner explores this particular angle further in his book *What Else Is Pastoral?* (2011), the title of which suggests it to be at least partially in response to Alpers' earlier work. Hiltner takes a more of an ecocritical stance by arguing that pastoral is in fact one of the longest traditions of environmentally conscious writing, and although his focus is on Renaissance literature, many of the points he makes about the pastoral seem relevant even in today's environmental context (*What Else Is Pastoral?* 38). Hiltner's central argument is that the kind of estranged idyllic settings that are considered to be typical of pastoral works do not exist merely to offer aesthetically pleasing alternatives to modern life, but that they have always reflected environmental issues in the real world.

As an example, Hiltner brings up Virgil's first eclogue, which is generally considered to be a prototypical pastoral work. Based on historical evidence about the poet actually losing his own farm due to political and economic circumstances, much like Meliboeus in the poem, Hiltner points out that in the eclogue, "Virgil is not looking back to some sort of golden age, but rather to an historically situated, contemporary moment when the environment becomes the subject of thematic awareness at the very moment of its withdrawal" (*What Else Is Pastoral?* 37). Hiltner's argument is in essence that pastoral literature is aware of how people relate to idealised natural environments as pure and untouched by the moral issues of civilisation, and that it uses this awareness to make the reader consider how aspects of such existence can be partially or completely threatened by human affairs. As such, the pastoral is environmentally conscious writing, not necessarily because it highlights or elevates the

aesthetic or moral qualities of natural existence, but because it foregrounds the idea that a return to nature may not even be possible.

Hiltner's approach is at least in this aspect similar to how Terry Gifford underlines the essence of pastoral. Gifford explains that "Pastoral is essentially a discourse of retreat" while also emphasising that it works because the readers acknowledge this discourse (*Pastoral* 46). Within this discourse of retreat, readers are aware of how relatively unrealistic both idyllic life and untouched natural landscapes are, based on the kind of language that is used to represent them, but the pastoral ideal as a potential existence and a place of retreat nevertheless retains its importance in relation to human life in general. Even if the actual retreat or return never actually happens, merely the idea that it would simply be possible to go back and withdraw from the complexities of modern life may serve as a way for the readers to reflect upon the present and the future. According to Gifford, understanding the pastoral as discourse establishes the difference between treating the pastoral retreat merely as an escape from present, and seeing it as a way to explore the present. In addition, he notes that this discourse is what establishes the different attitudes towards the pastoral, and other categorical differentiations such as the notions of sentimental and complex pastoral introduced by Leo Marx. (*Pastoral* 46).

Even a novel such as *The Road*, with its setting resembling anything but typical pastoral, still manages to engage its readers in this discourse, albeit in a more complicated manner due to how the environment appears to be irreparably damaged, while the characters still have to cling to a hope that a return to a better life is possible. McCarthy's novel thus manages to foreground a feeling that any pastoral return is impossible through its portrayal of the environment, while simultaneously depicting a return to a simpler life through its narrative. The postapocalyptic existence may emphasise survival, but it nevertheless employs the pastoral mode through its focus on simplicity, and particularly through how the characters are humbled

and at the mercy of the surrounding world. This relationship between the reality of its postapocalyptic world and its narrative focus on the simplest form of human life is what makes *The Road* an excellent modern representation of what Leo Marx referred to as complex pastoral. By presenting the age-old pastoral discourse filtered through the environmental anxiety of the late modern era, McCarthy's postapocalyptic novel explores human relationship with the environment in a way that has relevance regarding both the present and the future.

4.2 Complex Pastoral in the Anthropocene

The postapocalyptic setting is ultimately what complicates reading *The Road* as a pastoral text. That is not to say that the speculative timeframe in itself is an issue, even if the pastoral is generally about the past and the present. In his study on the science fiction genre, Darko Suvin argues that of all the genres of estranged fiction, science fiction is closest to the pastoral, as they both present the reader with an "imaginary framework of a world without money-economy, state-apparatus, and depersonalizing urbanisation" (9). Although Suvin is speaking of science fiction in a broad sense, his description seems most fitting for postapocalyptic fiction, which is a genre full of pastoral narratives of simplicity after the collapse of modern life.

Although many postapocalyptic settings have pastoral elements, they differ from the pastoral representation of *The Road* in one major respect. As emphasised by both Curtis (2010) and Hicks (2016), postapocalyptic fiction is generally considered to be about the fall of modern society and an exploration of what comes after. Because they focus on the relative fragility of culture, these narratives also tend to portray the natural world as something that exists to provide for humans even after society falls. In this respect, many postapocalyptic texts can be considered quite pastoral on the surface, but they are so in a way that reinforces the pastoral ideology: that nature is always there for humans to return to. As a result, the majority of

postapocalyptic fiction seems to be closer to Leo Marx's notion of sentimental rather than complex pastoral, because these texts do not necessarily employ the pastoral to negotiate the human condition between the ongoing social and technological developments and the environment.

What sets *The Road* apart from the majority of postapocalyptic texts and what effectively makes it complex pastoral is the scope of its apocalyptic representation in relation to time. Unlike most postapocalyptic narratives, in which the end of the world signifies the end of modern society, the apocalypse in *The Road* stands for the end of the world in a different sense. It is not only the end of history, but rather the culmination of an epoch in geological time in which the human race has become "a geophysical force on a planetary scale", as Timothy Morton's phrases this late modern phenomenon (*Dark Ecology* 9). Morton, like numerous contemporary environmentalists and ecocritics, refers to this ongoing period in the planet's history as the Anthropocene, which as a concept also stands for more than a time period, making it a useful concept for considering the pastoral in a late modern context.

The Anthropocene, originally conceived in the 1980s and popularised after the turn of the millennium, is a proposed term for the current geological time period, in which human agency has become a significant driving force on the planet's geological processes and ecosystems (Purdy 1-2). In most discourses, however, the Anthropocene is used rather as a blanket term for environmental issues, "a slogan for the age of climate change", as Jedediah Purdy calls it (2). Timothy Clark emphasises the complexity of the term's meaning and expressiveness by explaining that that, despite not being fully recognised by geologists, the Anthropocene has been adapted in the humanities as "a loose, shorthand term for all the new contexts and demands – cultural, ethical, aesthetics, philosophical and political – of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale, notably climate change, ocean

acidification, effects of overpopulation, deforestation, soil-erosion, overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems" (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 1-2).

That is, the Anthropocene can be understood as a cognitive mode of awareness regarding global environmental issues combined with the experience of living in the time where they have become emergent. Richard Kerridge observes that the environmental crisis becoming a prominent topic in society has created "an unusual gap between what we know and what we feel and do", giving the whole situation a certain "sense of absurdity" ("Ecocritical Approaches" 364). According to Clark, the reason for this type of disconnect between knowledge and action is that the Anthropocene presents itself as "an emergent scale effect", as awareness of it introduces the complicated relationship between individual human experience and acknowledging the ecological effects of the human species (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 72).

In his book *Dark Ecology*, which is essentially about the logic behind the Anthropocene, Timothy Morton elaborates on how problematic this issue of scale is by pointing out how the intention of any single person driving to work every day is not "to harm Earth, let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half billion-year history of this planet", but it is nevertheless what is happening when all the small and insignificant actions are scaled to the magnitude of the entire human species (*Dark Ecology* 8). Morton calls the realisation caused by this scale effect a "strange loop", comparing ecological awareness in the Anthropocene to noir fiction, in which the detective is implicated within the narrative, as they use forensic science to discover that they are indeed also the criminal (*Dark Ecology* 9). Consequently, Morton also calls the Anthropocene "the first fully antianthropocentric concept", as it enables a view of the human species, as an object, which is certainly real, as evidenced by its effects on the environment, but also one that is completely unapproachable and outside the influence of the individual (*Dark Ecology* 24).

What makes the Anthropocene particularly relevant to the pastoral has to do with this anti-anthropocentric orientation. If the pastoral is based on the idea that humans have become separated from nature, but that there is a possibility of going back, this idea in turn becomes highly problematic with the realisation that nature has become thoroughly influenced by the actions of the human species. In his book *After Nature: A Politics of the Anthropocene*, Jedediah Purdy argues that acknowledging the pervasiveness of human influence on the environment challenges the anthropocentric view of dividing the world into the human and the natural:

> The Anthropocene finds its most radical expression in our acknowledgement that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate. Because we shape everything, from the upper atmosphere to the deep seas, there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings. There is no place or living thing that we haven't changed. Our mark is on the cycle of weather and seasons, the global map of bioregions, and the DNA that organizes matter into life. (2-3)

What Purdy is suggesting is that this acknowledgement effectively renders the classic culture-nature binary, as well as many of the concepts based on it – such as the pastoral – outdated. There is no more – if there ever was – a nature to go back to. However, he also acknowledges that such an ecological view of nature, presenting an "interconnection so deep and widespread that boundaries among organisms, places, and systems are neither stable nor secure" may also have a positive side in providing "a comforting, pastoral promise" and perhaps how "recognizing oneself as a part of the nonhuman world, as continuous with it, could be a remedy for alienation and discontent" (41).

These ideas and issues Purdy is describing in relation to the Anthropocene are essentially also at the basis of what I have earlier discussed as post-pastoral approaches to literature. Such ways of approaching literary texts, which acknowledge the pastoral as a way of negotiating human relationship with the environment in new contexts, have become more topical with the Anthropocene. For example, Heather I. Sullivan discusses one such pastoral representation, which she refers to as "dark pastoral", inspired by Timothy Morton's notion of

dark ecology (85). As such, Sullivan's dark pastoral is based on Morton's environmental aesthetics, which encourage treating "all kinds of art forms as ecological: not just ones that are about lions and mountains, not just journal writing and sublimity", and in which ecological thought embraces "negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 17).

Sullivan defines dark pastoral specifically as "a rejection of the artificial delineation of local and global, of cities here and rural countryside there, as if they were independent from each other in the Anthropocene" (85). In many respects Sullivan shares her views regarding the pastoral with both Buell and Gifford, as she similarly suggests how "we need full recognition of our own pastoral impulses juxtaposed with current and scientifically informed skepticism" (87). The dark pastoral mainly differs from Buell's mature environmental aesthetics and Gifford's post-pastoral in how it emphasises the ecological side of the impurity of nature as a result of global interconnectedness. This is due to Sullivan's focus being on "dirty traffic", which includes the global flow of people, goods pollution – essentially any anthropogenic movement of matter on the globe (84).

The Road certainly also qualifies as dark pastoral, as it depicts a postapocalyptic world where the borders between the global and the local, the city and the countryside and the human and the natural have been consumed in a global fire – one with anthropogenic origins. It embraces the interconnectedness of all things by removing these categories of environmental difference, rendering everything in the world uniformly ashen. Its world is not only abundant with negativity, ugliness and the horror – it is defined by these aspects of the darker side of nature. What then makes *The Road* particularly pastoral, is that on a narrative level, the negativity of existence, the ugliness of the world and the horror of experiencing it, all appear thoroughly ordinary, mundane, and real. The world in it may be full of things that do not

represent the usual aesthetic values assigned to the natural world, but at the same time there is nothing unnatural about them.

Being a postapocalyptic novel only enhances these pastoral aspects of *The Road*, because the threat of environmental apocalypse is perhaps the central underlying mood in the Anthropocene: the world – if not outright ending – is at least changing in a way that is unknown to us. Dipesh Chakrabarty describes the Anthropocene as the era where the previously seemingly solid border between natural history and human history is crumbling (207). As a historian, he asserts that this is problematic because the future is becoming increasingly contingent not only on social developments, but also on how the human species act as "geological agents" on a global scale (207). He states that it is consequently "not surprising then that the crisis of climate change should produce anxieties precisely around futures that we cannot visualize" (211).

It is not at all surprising that these anxieties are shifting the postapocalyptic imagination towards a direction where the focus is not only on the end of the human world, but on the end of the world as a whole. If the apocalyptic and postapocalyptic genres have always been about the anxieties of modern society, *The Road* deviates from this formula in that its postapocalypse is not after Modernity, but rather after the Anthropocene. This is also a relatively subtle change – at least when it comes to the poetics of the postapocalypse, as the Anthropocene and Modernity are similar concepts. Both are time periods that are defined through the feeling of living on the edge of time – experiencing the *now* as a result of history. And as Chakrabarty points out, Modernity and the Anthropocene may not even be separable, as "The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history" (212). As such, postapocalyptic fiction with environmental themes seems fitting for the late modern era, in which societal and environmental issues can no longer be clearly separated into different categories.

Ultimately, *The Road* is a complex pastoral of the contemporary era because it is so fundamentally about the Anthropocene, in how it embraces an ecological view and aesthetic that is a radical departure from the classic view of nature that is becoming increasingly problematic. In his *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx introduced the notion of complex pastoral, which essentially revolves round the pastoral idyll being disturbed by a counterforce. The counterforce, which for Marx primarily took the shape of the machine – or technology, may stand for any emergent phenomenon that challenges the pastoral ideal. In *The Road*, the counterforce is no longer one categorical thing that can be isolated, but it is the entire feeling and realisation of how the human and the natural can no longer be considered separate categories. The Anthropocene takes the role of the pastoral counterforce, as the devastated world in *The Road* serves as a projection of the culmination of the ongoing present, in which both the natural environment and the human world are united in the world's destruction.

4.3 Back to a Different Nature

One of the most noticeable aesthetic features of *The Road* is its complete absence of nature. Its world is "Barren, silent, godless" (4).There are no living things, no natural beauty or colours, as McCarthy's postapocalyptic vision is dominated by death, ugliness and darkness. This absence is so literal that the word *nature* itself, or any of its derivative forms do not appear a single time in the novel, and although McCarthy generally only uses the word to refer to the essence of things, its complete omission in *The Road* still feels like another way to emphasise the lack of nature. This absolute negation of the natural aesthetic is also what establishes *The Road* as a post-pastoral novel, because it enables a discovery of another kind of environmental aesthetics, leading to acknowledging a very different kind of natural world.

Terry Gifford, who uses *The Road* as an example text for applying his post-pastoral theory to fiction, also recognises the importance of its lack of nature as the basis of its pastoral

representation. He attributes the effectiveness of the novel's environmental ethos to how its slow survival narrative draws the reader's attention towards the things that are missing in it: the "aesthetic of Nature", as well as any "firm evidence of causality" regarding the state of the world ("*The Road* and a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction" 7). He then proceeds to argue that the basis for calling *The Road* a post-pastoral novel lies in how the imagination seeks to explain the missing things, and how this "Derridian notion of the presence of nature even in its absence" guides the reader into making their own conclusions about what happened ("*The Road* and a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction" 11). Furthermore, he asserts that these conclusions would likely be affected by the current prevalence of environmental discourse:

> In a sense, it is only in the current social conditions, which foreground environmental concerns, that McCarthy can assume the reader will not only notice the absence of Nature, but will be shocked by its absence ("*The Road* and a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction" 8)

Gifford's reasoning echoes my previous argument on how it is the ambiguity of the apocalypse that guides the reader's imagination towards the environmental discourse. The basis for a pastoral reading of *The Road* is the Anthropocene imagination, where the reader becomes Morton's noir-protagonist, discovering their own role in the demise of nature through the process of the narrative. Here Gifford is referring to it as "shock", but it is the same thing he has earlier discussed as a defining feature of a post-pastoral texts: their capability to instil humility in the reader, so that environmental consciousness may lead into environmental conscience (*Pastoral* 163).

There is of course more to *The Road* as a post-pastoral novel than merely the shock of nature's absence, or acknowledging the issues with the aesthetic of nature. Even Morton, who is critical towards nature as an aesthetic category, and who seeks to deconstruct the idea of nature, does it not to prove that nature itself is problematic, but to find a better way of thinking the environment (*Ecology without Nature* 6). Furthermore, as Gifford remarks on this project, "the aesthetic of Nature that Morton has in mind is actually the pastoral", and as such his idea

of finding an environmental aesthetic without nature is also post-pastoral ("*The Road* and a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction" 10). In Gifford's proposition of the post-pastoral, the way to move beyond both nature and the pastoral, without completely abandoning either, is to find unidealised awe through recognising the complicated processes in the environment (*Pastoral* 151-152). Morton's proposition for a better environmental aesthetic actually follows a very similar idea: as it stems from the realisation and recognition that all objects in the world are connected in what he calls "*the mesh*: a sprawling network of interconnection without center or edge" (*Dark Ecology* 81). In both cases, moving away from the anthropocentric, pastoral view of nature, is not accomplished by denying the impulses of the human mind to view the natural world as something special, but instead by expanding the scope of what is natural.

The environments in *The Road* never resemble the ideal aesthetic of nature, but there nevertheless remains a lingering undertone of nature in how the environments feel connected in this grey world. This is a continuation of the kind of naturalism that Bill Hardwig describes as a staple of McCarthy's naturalistic writing, a pastoral vision focusing on the holistic presence of nature, often emphasising the raw, ugly sides of both the environment and of human existence:

> Especially in his early work, but really in nearly all of his fiction, McCarthy is committed to a project of peeling away social and cultural conventions in order to explore the non-contingent humanity/animality that undergirds our existence. This reduction of life to its barest realities is one that characterizes many classic naturalist texts. (38)

It is the postapocalyptic imagination where this aesthetic becomes fully realised, as the death of nature reveals a world that may be a-natural, but not unnatural. The following passage, which is a typical example of how McCarthy depicts traversal in the wasteland through series of connected landscapes, shows how the novel's portrayal of nature is never present in the aesthetic that is visible to the reader, but in understanding the presence of nature as ecological processes:

> The land was gullied and eroded and barren. The bones of dead creatures sprawled in the wastes. Middens of anonymous trash. Farmhouses in the fields scoured of their paint and the clapboards spooned and sprung from the wallstuds. All of it shadowless and without feature. The road descended through a jungle of dead kudzu. A marsh where the dead reeds lay over the water. Beyond the edge of the fields the sullen haze hung over earth and sky alike. By late afternoon it had begun to snow and they went on with the tarp over them and the wet snow hissing on the plastic. (177-178)

At a glance, nothing in this passage seems particularly natural. The locales: the wastes, a jungle, a marsh, and fields do not represent the kind of pleasing nature that anyone would ever dream of going back to, and this effect is only amplified by the abundance of dead animals and plants. The environment reads almost like a literal negation of the aesthetic of nature, as the emphasis is on insignificance and featurelessness of things rather than on vibrant details and colours. The unpleasant wet snow, with its hissing sound is the final confirmation that this existence is as far removed from the pastoral idea of nature as possible.

However, read within the post-pastoral frame, in which the emphasis is on finding awe in all natural environments, not merely the idealised or the sublime, the passage becomes thoroughly natural. In such environmental aesthetic, nature is not limited only to the immediate experience, but is instead present through understanding all the underlying and external processes that unite and define the environment. On a textual level, the natural world in *The Road* is not in the nouns or adjectives that are used to describe the environments, but in the processes that they imply and gesture towards. In the passage above, both the land and the farmhouses are defined by the erosion on their surface, gesturing towards the elements of nature that affects all things equally. Likewise, the prevalence of the dead creatures and plants serves as a reminder of the darker side of nature, how all life eventually has to die and then unite in the process of decomposition. Even the way these environments are presented seems to depend on external processes rather than on the essence of the objects that constitute them, as phrases such as “All of it shadowless and without feature” and “the sullen haze hung over earth and sky alike” (177) suggest that the appearance, as well as the ambient feeling of the environment

depends on the lighting and the weather. The final sentence, which shifts the narrative back to the characters, also emphasises how human life is also ultimately a part of these processes, as the man and the boy are humbled by the elements. Furthermore, the fact that human agency in the entire passage is reduced to a single clause is another good example of how *The Road* emphasises an ecocentric view on a very formal level, by embedding the human elements into text that is mainly about the environment, instead of representing the environment as the background in human affairs.

This kind of view on the environment represents what Gifford discusses as some of the defining features of post-pastoral texts – that being the humbling view of the human in contrast to the environment as well as "the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution (*Pastoral* 153). Admittedly, in the case of the postapocalyptic world, the emphasis is often on the destructive side of the universe, and the full recognition of a more complex nature may have to rely on the reader being able to imagine the scene as it may have looked before the end of the world. However, *The Road* is also abundant with scenes of the world as it was, framed as the man's memories, which also promote a view of the natural world as ongoing processes:

> The shore was lined with birchtrees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond. The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past. The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away. His uncle turned the boat and shipped the oars and they drifted over the sandy shallows until the transom grated in the sand. A dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water. Yellow leaves. (13)

This description of the environment is part of a relatively idyllic scene from the man's past, which reads almost like an embodiment of pastoral nostalgia, a slow and uneventful day the man spent with his uncle, during which "Neither of them had spoken a word", described as "the perfect day of his childhood . . . the day to shape the days upon" (13). Yet, what is notable about this nostalgic scene is that despite its idyllic feeling, its view of nature is not aesthetically

idealised. Here, just as in the novel's postapocalyptic environments, nature is described almost exclusively through an aesthetic that emphasises the more negative aspects of life, as well as the ongoing ecological processes. In this distant childhood memory, it is the trees in various states of being that best exemplify the novel's consistent view of nature as something that is present through a constant process of death and rebirth, not just picturesque scenery.

This post-pastoral view of nature is also present in how the novel upholds its pastoral mode: the humbling representation of the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Most of the time, the natural environment is immediate and meaningful to the novel's characters primarily through the harsh – often life-threatening elements, which act as the kind of "impressive humbling force outside of human control or comprehension" that Gifford refers to as a potential source of unidealised awe towards the natural world (*Pastoral* 152). If nature is constantly present in how the environments gesture towards processes, it is doubly present in how its characters are directly affected by these processes.

Even a seemingly harmless natural phenomenon such as rain has significance, as it instils awe, and quite often even dread in McCarthy's grey and cold postapocalypse that is reminiscent of the imagery of nuclear winter. One morning the two are greeted by cold rain so intense that the rainfall "gusted over the car even under the overpass and it danced in the road beyond", forcing them to stop their journey and simply wait, as "By the time it had slacked a good part of the day was gone" (83). Sometimes the rain has more severe implications than merely wasting time, which in itself is a valuable resource. One night the man wakes up to the sound of thunder at night, and in the barren landscape, protected only by a plastic tarp he comes to a grim realisation: "If they got wet there'd be n fires to dry by. If they got wet they would probably die" (15). The close presence of death in the survival narrative is what makes these natural phenomena so dangerous and impactful, to be respected – something that instils awe in

the sense that resembles the original meaning of the word by emphasising the awful side of nature.

Even the times when the natural world is presented from a relatively safe distance, McCarthy has a way of depicting the natural world as majestic as it is terrible, the insignificant human beings at its mercy:

> In the night a storm broke in the mountains above them and came cannonading downcountry cracking and booming and the stark gray world appeared again and again out of the night in the shrouded flare of the lightning. The boy clung to him. It all passed on. A brief rattle of hail and then the slow cold rain" (47-48).

The language here is nothing short of humbling. A powerful storm, cannonading and cracking and booming in the night serves as a brief but powerful reminder of nature's presence. It is moments like this where *The Road* feels the least postapocalyptic, as the remnants of the human world are swept aside, and the grey world of nothingness is momentarily illuminated by the lightning, leaving a lasting feeling of awe in the persistence of the natural world.

However, when it comes to the pastoral mode, and being humbled amidst the environment, perhaps the greatest effect comes from how the novel's overall representation of survival in the postapocalyptic wasteland emphasises the limits of human existence. The narrative of *The Road* may be about crossing the former United States to reach its south-eastern seaboard, yet this journey exists mainly as a frame for the more immediate narrative, which is about moment-to-moment struggle for life. The narration is constantly accompanied by hunger, thirst and exhaustion, often quite literally forcing the characters down to earth, whether it is "crouched in the roadside ditch like lepers" (69), or how they "lay shivering and exhausted on the cold ground" (186). At one point, McCarthy employs explicit Holocaust imagery to articulate the negativity of this existence, as the boy is described as being "like something out of a deathcamp. Starved, exhausted, sick with fear" (117).

Andrew Hoberek remarks that "For a bestselling postapocalyptic genre piece, *The Road* is surprisingly committed to an unremitting affect of exhaustion" (486). As he points out, this

exhaustion is not only present in how the characters are constantly struggling, but also in the novel's style, as in contrast to "McCarthy's Faulknerian high style" in his previous works, the prose in *The Road* is often relatively simple, consisting of simple sentences and repeated expressions, resembling a "Hemingwayesque" minimalism (487-488). Indeed, the world running out of things together with the words to describe them makes it so that exhaustion is not merely an aspect of life for these characters – it is their reality. The sparsity of the language used to describe things quite literally reflects how the lives these characters are actively being reduced from what they used to be. As the man's wife tells him in one of his dreamlike flashbacks: "We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film" (55).

As such, there is a pastoral frame of simplicity in the novel, in which the relationship between humans and the environment is reduced to its most basic form: survival. This manner of representing complicated affairs through simple narrative and form resembles what William Empson famously noted as the essence of pastoral writing: "putting the complex into the simple", the capability of representing complex matters in a simplified frame (22). In classic pastoral works, this frame of simplicity was established by focusing on herdsmen, whose seemingly simple lives projected a very specific part of human existence that could nevertheless be seen as a representation of a universal human ideal of simplicity (Alpers 26). Potential issues in these simple lives could then be seen to be representative of issues more generally related to human existence (Alpers 24).

In *The Road*, this focus on the simple and mundane offers a basis for interpretation of various complex matters. Stephanie Arel for example sees this emphasis on simplicity as a way to articulate human spirituality in a world that has largely lost its meaning, in which people have been all but reduced to animals (2014). Arel notes that the representation of mundane things, such as how opening and eating canned peaches is described as a venerated act, or how taking a bath in clean water is depicted almost as a spiritual rebirth, serves to "disrupt and unite

distinctions between divine and human", by making the simplest of things seem spiritual and meaningful (101). Matthew Mullins on the other hand considers the social aspect, as he argues that the novel's constant presence of hunger together with a postapocalyptic frame alludes to the various issues relating to modernity (2011). Mullins takes the idea of representing the complex through the simple to the extreme as he argues that: "McCarthy focuses on hunger as an essentially human problem, a problem that resonates throughout the whole of human history, a problem that reveals the shortcomings of modernity and of our attempts to deal with its effect so far" (91).

This frame of simplicity also supports the novel's post-pastoral representation of the environment as a unified realm that is not divided in categories based on concepts such as culture and nature. This comes across in how these very basic actions that the novel's narrative primarily consists of, such as sleeping or eating, promote a view of the world where the meaning of place is de-emphasised, and in which objects in the world are not valued based on their aesthetic qualities, but solely on their usefulness. The man and his son may sleep in the cold woods, or in abandoned houses, just as well as "in a parked car beneath an overpass with the suitcoats and the blanket piled over them" (82), or even "sprawled in the road like traffic victims" (202). The postapocalyptic world, stripped of the boundaries between the natural and the human world, provides a post-pastoral view that emphasises human embeddedness in the environment through these depictions of simple, yet necessary actions.

Likewise, when it comes to finding food or water, all the old-world standards of where these things come from or how they look are irrelevant. The man and his son are more than happy to eat "shrunken dried and wrinkled" morels they find "in the mulch and ash" (40). After they gather these "small alien-looking things" to fry them in a pan, the boy even remarks: "This is a good place, Papa" (40-41). From the boy's perspective, the place is good simply because it provides them with sustenance, regardless of the aesthetic quality of the ash-covered woods

full of “twisted and knotted and black” trees surrounding them (40). There is a very similar scene, in which the man, nearly sick with thirst, discovers an old and seemingly filthy drain. After clearing through “a tray filled with a wet gray sludge from the roof mixed with a compost and dead leaves and twigs” and some filtering layers, he finally discovers “a cistern filled with water so sweet that he could smell it” (122). He spends a long time slowly sipping the water: “Nothing in his memory anywhere of anything so good” (123). Here, the discovery of an old drain is made to seem like the man had found a natural spring, further reinforcing the idea that objects of human origin are not separate from the environment.

The postapocalyptic environment in *The Road* consists equally of both man-made objects and the remnants of the natural world. In a manner that is typical to the postapocalyptic genre, its characters actively scavenge the world for abandoned things, sometimes discovering objects, such as a can of Coca-Cola, which the man presents almost ceremoniously to his son who has of course never seen such a thing. Bill Hardwig observes that the novel’s elegiac tone is not limited only to the natural world, but that there is a “profound tenderness for the artificial” in how these man-made objects are treated, actively invoking a nostalgic sense of loss (44). Furthermore, he notes that the focus on human objects in *The Road* seems unusual, because these kinds of things representing modern consumer culture are precisely what McCarthy has in his previous works “tried to pry away in order to get to something more substantial” (44). Hardwig suggests that these objects are treated in such a manner because they represent aspects of the modern world that are worth recognising: “a security and comfort that can only be known through imagining their loss” (45). The boy expresses such sense of loss when he suspects why his father treats the can of Coke like it is something special: “It’s because I wont ever get to drink another one, isn’t it?” (24). Hardwig’s reasoning for why McCarthy treats these man-made objects with unusual tenderness is that the sense of loss associated with seeing these

objects metonymises the loss of the world itself, conveying the message that the modern world, despite all its issues, is still far from the worst existence imaginable (49).

The tenderness man-made objects are treated with in *The Road* can also be seen as a progression of McCarthy's naturalist ethos. Stripped of their meaning in the postapocalyptic world, most of these human objects become just like anything else in the environment. The novel's equal treatment of dead nature and the remaining human objects serves to emphasise the world becoming unified after the fall of human society. This manner of representing natural and human objects interchangeably is another feature of *The Road* that is distinctly post-pastoral, because it shows that the material human world has never truly been separate from the natural world. It is what Gifford regards as one of the key features of post-pastoral texts: conveying a recognition of "nature as culture and of culture as nature" (*Pastoral* 162). The postapocalypse in *The Road* is full of things from the old world, that may have once constituted a reified second nature, but in a world where things are removed from their previous context – "Everything uncoupled from its shoring" (11) – these things are ultimately revealed to be nothing more than another part of the environment. This idea is expressed quite clearly when the two explore an old train in a forest: "If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again" (180). To the man, the train may signify a variety of meanings, but in the absolute sense that it appears to the boy, it is just another object in the environment, no different from rocks or trees.

The brief bunker segment halfway through the novel is perhaps the best example of its portrayal of culture as nature. On the verge of starving, the two miraculously come upon a hidden bunker full of food, water and other supplies. The abandoned shelter is so abundant with things that when the boy asks what he found, the man simply answers: "I found everything. Everything" (139). Already, this utterance separates the bunker from the rest of the world,

because it stands in contrast to the kind of scarce ontology McCarthy establishes throughout the novel by using the word *nothing* very liberally to describe the emptiness of the postapocalyptic world. The two spend only a few days in the bunker in fear of being discovered, but even in that time their existence is very different. There are things like morning coffee, warm water, and even a toilet. This brief episode in the bunker, in "this tiny paradise" (150), stands for a kind of return to Eden, which is of course rather ironical because the bunker is a veritable paradise not due to its abundance of natural things, but of man-made objects: "The richness of a vanished world" (139). This ironical reversal of going back to nature serves to underline the novel's post-pastoral view of the world, in which the separation of the human and the natural has come full circle in the realisation that the two had never been separate in the first place.

The most explicitly post-pastoral aspect of *The Road* is its humbling representation of human existence as something that is meaningful, yet ultimately insignificant. On the surface it may seem like McCarthy is attempting to portray human life as miserable as it could possibly be, but such a grounded representation of life also presents a thoroughly unanthropocentric view of what it is to be human in relation to everything else. This humbling emphasis on insignificance permeates the entirety of the novel, and it is at times presented very explicitly, such as in the following passage, which typically to *The Road,* begins in a description of the surrounding world:

> They scrabbled through the charred ruins of houses they would not have entered before. A corpse floating in the black water of a basement among the trash and rusting ductwork. He stood in a livingroom partly burned and open to the sky. The waterbuckled boards sloping away into the yard. Soggy volumes in a bookcase. He took one down and opened it and then put it back. Everything damp. Rotting. In a drawer he found a candle. No way to light it. He put it in his pocket. (130)

The world is once again brought to life through processes, as everything seems to be slowly decaying in unison: rusting and rotting. The passage, however, takes a completely different turn when the man steps out of the ruins:

> He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (130)

The second half of the passage continues with a very different scope and a heavily allegorical tone. The man, emerging from the basement in a way reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave, walks out into the light and nothing less than "the absolute truth of the world" is revealed to him. The nature of this realisation is quite clear: man is alone in the world, an insignificant part of the cold, secular universe. What adds both an apocalyptic and an environmental aspect to this revelation is the description of the "intestate earth", a dead world whose natural resources never belonged to those who consumed them. The final sentence in particular articulates the novel's post-pastoral view of human embeddedness in the environment in the absolute sense. "Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes": the idea that all aspects of reality – that human existence itself is borrowed, only a fleeting instance in the cold, indifferent universe, before the atoms that constitute the individual disperse into something else. On the other hand, as Ben De Bruyn notes, suggesting that human existence is borrowed can also be seen as a form of environmental consciousness, as it emphasises that those who inhabit the world now are only borrowing it from the future generations (781). Either way, this realisation that human existence is borrowed, serves to underline the novel's ecocentric, post-pastoral ethos.

4.4 The World that Never Was

So far, I have discussed how *The Road* is a post-pastoral novel, based on its use of the pastoral mode, which is established through a focus on simplicity and survival in an unrelenting postapocalyptic world, as well as how its portrayal of the environment represents complex

pastoral in an era in which human influence on the natural world is becoming increasingly problematic. There is yet another distinctly post-pastoral aspect to the novel, which is how it complicates the pastoral's typical representation of the past and the present. In a rather comprehensive definition of modern pastoral, Peter Marinelli emphasises the importance of time:

> For us [the pastoral] has come to mean any literature which deals with the complexities of human life against a background of simplicity. All that is necessary is that memory and imagination should conspire to render a not too distant past of comparative innocence as more pleasurable than a harsh present, overwhelmed either by the growth of technology or the shadows of advancing age. (3)

This definition from 1971 is still quite relevant, particularly in how it connects simpler life to past existence – an idea that is certainly present in contemporary thought. Marinelli explains how this notion of looking backwards is perhaps the most important aspect of pastoral literature, as it speaks directly to an essential part of the human mind and imagination: "The human creature's universal remembrance of a better time" (15). Indeed, if the pastoral can be considered through the cognitive association of connected binaries – simple and complex life, the past and the present, the natural and the human world – time is the only absolute relation, unaffected by surrounding cultural context.

The Road evokes the pastoral by constantly looking backwards in time. It is full of descriptions of how objects and life were in the past, sometimes taking the form of dreams, flashback-like narration or simply memories of the past. Of course, as a postapocalyptic text, it also engages the imagination in another temporal layer, which has to do with how the postapocalyptic world reveals something essential about the world before. As such, there are effectively two distinct versions of the past in *The Road*: the pastoral notion of past as the ideal alternative to the present, as well as the implied world before its destruction. The way the novel presents these different ideas of the past in a manner that is often conflicting can be considered

another post-pastoral feature, as it actively questions the universal pastoral preference for the past, and instead promotes an appreciation of the present.

The different notions of the past in the novel are marked quite clearly by their tone of presentation. The man's dreams, "so rich in color" that they are "turned to ash instantly" (21) upon waking up, represent the idea of the past as an escape from the present. These images of "walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them" (18), or "softly colored worlds of human love, the song of birds, the sun" (272) are clearly not memories, but an Arcadian image of the past as an idyllic existence. Many of these dreams even resonate with Garden of Eden imagery, as in them the man is together with his wife, leading him to express thoughts about the absolute value of such existence: "if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different" (219). These dreams serve to highlight the idealised representation of the past as unreal, which is important because such ideas of the past are also reflected in utopian desires for the future. As Gifford points out, the imagined simple past may also "project into an idealised future, a restoration of rural values that urbanisation, or industrialisation, or technological alienation from the earth have lost" (*Pastoral* 21). Thus, by presenting the images of "such siren worlds" (18) that the man is "loathe to wake from" (131) as clearly unreal, *The Road* also comments on how this idea of seeing the ideal world either in the past or the future is only a way of avoiding issues in the present, such as those related to the environment.

This awareness of pastoralised visions of the past and their future projections being unrealistic and unsustainable is further complemented by how *The Road* looks back towards the other version of the past: the real world before the apocalyptic event. The novel is full of moments in which the past world is represented in a manner that emphasises the cold, indifferent nature of existence – the same idea I have earlier discussed as a central factor of the novel's post-pastoral representation. This specific tone is not only present in how the postapocalypse is represented, but it is also present – perhaps even more prominently so – in

the scenes that recall the past world. One of the better examples of how McCarthy uses the postapocalyptic imagination in conjunction with a post-pastoral vision to emphasise the value of the present, is when the two discover a dam and the conversation eventually leads to time as the boy asks:

> Will the dam be there for a long time?
> I think so. It's made of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even.
> Do you think there could be fish in the lake?
> No. There's nothing in the lake. (20)

In this brief exchange, the tone is decidedly postapocalyptic as the eternal presence of the man-made dam is contrasted with a final realisation that all life in the surrounding environment is gone forever. This colossal wreck of the hydroelectric dam stands metonymically – as the indirect reason for why the fish are gone, as well as a reminder of how temporally limited, yet potentially impactful human lives are. What would present a rather powerful image on its own is then further emphasised by the rather contrasting passage following right after:

> In that long ago somewhere very near this place he'd watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air. (20)

This scene has a pastoral feel to it, beginning from its seemingly specific, yet rather ambiguous referents of time in place, which give the narration a rather universal scope. The natural imagery, focusing on the cold, indifferent reality of nature as a balance of life and death makes it distinctly post-pastoral. Here, the man witnessing a falcon taking down a crane in flight symbolises exactly the kind of "awe in attention to the natural world" that Gifford regards as the basis of such literature (*Pastoral* 151-152). The fact that this post-pastoral vision follows a scene in which the focus is on apocalyptic imagination: the death of all life in the lake due to processes such as industrialisation, makes it seem like this particular scene is presented as an alternative to such a future. It is but one example of how McCarthy uses apocalyptic rhetoric

together with a post-pastoral vision, not only to lament the dying world, but to present an alternative through an appreciation of the natural world as a whole.

This project of de-emphasising the mythical and idyllic past in favour of the present also extends beyond the natural world. At one point the man comes to "a once grand house sited on a rise above the road" (105). This image of a pastoral country house is however soon dispelled by the likely history of the building: how "Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays" (106). The house then turns out to be inhabited by a group of cannibals, as if to further stress the continuation of its dark history. Furthermore, as Hoberek points out, the basement where the cannibals' victims are held calls back to the holds of slave ships, and the piles of clothing in a corner of the manor may even remind of the Holocaust (489). Hoberek argues that the historical imagery points specifically to the regional history of the Southeast, rather than any "innate human potential for savagery", but with the novel's generally negative portrayal of human character, it is quite possible to read this history of exploitation in general terms (489). There is also a post-pastoral aspect to this emphasis on continuous exploitation, whether it is the environment or other, marginalised human beings. Gifford explains that the post-pastoral orientation is not limited only to reconciling the human relationship with the environment, and that in order for the world to be represented as truly whole and intact, the post-pastoral should "address both environmental and social exploitation at the same time" (*Pastoral* 165). By presenting the environmental issues and the historical exploitation of human others in the same frame, *The Road* questions all aspects of the imagined past equally.

Another significant way in which *The Road* uses the temporal assumptions of pastoral in a subversive manner is through the boy, who is constantly present, witnessing a very different world than his father. The boy's major role in the narrative is significant, as the child can be considered a modern pastoral character who has particularly in the era of the novel taken

the role of the classic shepherd (Marinelli 75). This pastoral quality of the child dates back to Romantic literature, which often contained the idea that children are as a result of their innocence more directly aligned with nature (Empson 261-262). Hiltner notes how this idea is present in contemporary thought and literature, in which the idea of the pastoral golden age can be considered in relation to the individual life, and as such childhood and its surrounding environments come to represent the idyllic pastoral nostalgia (*What Else Is Pastoral?* 47). As such, the child represents a relatively simple character, whose experience reflects life in a general sense, as childhood can be considered a common aspect in all lives.

The narrative in *The Road* often emphasises the experience of the child, by making it very clear that the man and the boy witness a very different world, as numerous conversations between the two focus on their differing perspectives. The boy at times seems almost like "an alien" (129) to the man, until he eventually also realises that "to the boy he himself was an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed" (153). The narrative voice, which is focalised around the man's thoughts, constantly stresses that the child likely does not see the ruins of a world and a dying nature, but the only world that is real to him. As Hiltner explains, one of the ways in which childhood relates to the pastoral is also how we have a tendency to consider "the backdrop into which we are born" as more natural, whether it is "wilderness, rural, suburban, urban or some combination of these" (66). To the boy, the postapocalyptic world is both natural, as well as the scenery of his childhood, which in turn raises a question about the authenticity of thoughts relating to both the idea of nature, as well as the pastoral preference for the past. The novel also exposes this pastoral mode of thought from another angle. When the two come upon the man's childhood home, he is excited to display the house to the boy, who on the other hand is hesitant, as to him the old house is nothing more but a potentially dangerous place. It is through moments like these that *The Road* actively stands opposed to the sentimental pastoral impulse, by presenting the boy who is living his childhood

in a postapocalyptic world in the same frame together with the man's remembrance of a better past.

The Road 's post-pastoral appreciation of the present emerges as a result of its portrayal of the limited lives of its characters against a backdrop that represents the world in a more general sense, due to how the narrative shifts between the imagined past, the world that was, and a world that could be. There is one specific instance, in which what is perhaps the novel's most important idea, is articulated in the form of an unusual, yet important question:

> On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was? (32)

This curiously formatted query presents a significant shift in tone within this brief passage, which even as a whole represents a more universal and distant narrative voice. The fact that this question is one of the few instances in the novel containing a punctuation mark – the only time a colon or a semicolon ever appears in a sentence – gives it an aura of importance, making it stand separate from the rest of the text, as if deliberately composed to seek the reader's attention. Bill Hardwig notes the importance of the query as he refers to it as "the question that haunts this book". Hardwig's interpretation is that the question "cannot be answered", and that it exists to give meaning specifically to how man-made objects are presented in the novel in a way that highlights their failure to be useful in a future that never came to be, which then also raises the question about their purpose and value in the past (48).

Although Hardwig's interpretation of the question also emphasises the value of the present, it is missing an important detail about how "the never to be" and "what never was" may also refer to the world as a whole, not only individual things and memories of them. When the boy wakes from a dream and refuses to tell his father what the dream is about, the man replies: "When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up" (189). This phrase complements the

query presented much earlier in the novel, confirming that the question the novel presents to the reader is about how a past existence that was never real differs from a future that will never be. The question still remains a rhetorical one, but in this form it directly interrogates the temporal frame of pastoral thought: what Marinelli refers to as the universal need to seek "an escape from the overwhelming present in a sanctified past or in some indistinct and redeeming future" (9-10). By presenting this question together with a postapocalyptic world that reflects many of the global anxieties of the contemporary era, *The Road* emphasises that neither the past or the future are accessible to us, and that only what happens in the present may define how the world will be.

Despite its narrative constantly lingering in the past, *The Road* is often about the potential and the sustainability of the present, as even its representation of the past focuses on the timeless qualities of the world rather than imagining a universally better existence. Due to this post-pastoral vision that is constantly present in the background, even the bleak postapocalyptic narrative may instil hope. Ashley Kunsa supports such an optimistic view of the novel by claiming that McCarthy's foray into the postapocalyptic genre is not merely in order to call attention to the environmental crisis by representing the "horrible facts of our collective situation" through a setting that acts as a warning (68). Instead, she emphasises that what is truly remarkable about the novel is how McCarthy is able "to render a dreadful world while simultaneously conjuring an alternative with such clearness of vision that its truth is likewise unquestionable" (68). To Kunsa, the presence of this alternative future, a "New Eden", is apparent in how the novel uses language and narrative to present a world in which most things have become meaningless in order to emphasise the things that are truly meaningful (62-63). This kind of optimistic reading, which looks beyond the postapocalyptic setting to witness a reimagining of the present, is possible due to how *The Road* emphasises that the current world is the only one that will ever exist, and that its future will be shaped by how we treat it.

If there is a single clear message to be found in *The Road*, its powerful and enigmatic final passage may be the best place to look for one. The novel concludes briefly after the man's death, as the boy meets a group which at least seems to consist of decent people. After ending its narrative on an optimistic tone, the novel leaves the reader with one final image:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286-287)

This concluding passage is certainly difficult to overlook, as it seems to be placed at the very end in order to give meaning to everything before it. This is apparent from how the passage is perhaps the novel's most often cited one, with a variety of different readings by critics. Hardwig for one, focuses on how the novel's conclusion is decidedly environmental in tone, as it presents an elegiac description of a species of fish which are particularly vulnerable to ecological changes in order to lament the loss of nature as a thing that cannot be replaced (49). Kunsa on the other hand focuses on the patterns of maps and mazes on the backs of the trout, and how presenting them at the end of the postapocalyptic journey – which is often seemingly without direction – suggests that there may be a deeper understanding of the world beyond our current one (68). Likewise, De Bruyn sees the passage as one which clearly underlines the novel's theme of environmental interconnectedness – particularly through the image of the human hand holding a fish that smells of moss and forests, while also containing patterns reflecting the complexity of the entire world on its back (788).

It is the thoroughly post-pastoral tone of the passage combined with the entirety of the novel before it that allows it to communicate all these different meanings – from an appreciation of the complexity of the natural world to an understanding of its relative fragility. The referent of time, "once there were" is particularly effective because it is typically used to

point to a long-forgotten historical time – either real or imagined, whereas here it is used to mythologise the brook trout, whose living habitats have been shifting due to environmental changes over the past century. By using the image of the brook trout in this manner, the novel collapses the imagined past, the world before the apocalypse, as well as the potential future – to remind us that the future depends solely on our collective actions in the present, as even the seemingly unending modernity eventually leaves behind things no longer existing in the world.

This emphasis on the appreciation of the present that encourages environmental consciousness is complemented by the post-pastoral awe expressed by the language used to describe the animals themselves: the maps and mazes on their bodies communicate how the world can be experienced and appreciated by humans – but also how the complexity and connectedness of the natural world – where "all things were older than man" – retain their mystical quality. If the postapocalyptic revelation in *The Road* is about reaching a deeper understanding of the world through witnessing its barest elements – how "in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made" (274) – the novel's conclusion underlines this same idea with a decidedly environmental message by emphasising how these things "could not be put back" or "be made right again" (287), as they would simply be gone forever.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined why Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* may be considered one of the most important environmental novels of modern times. The novel's depiction of the end of the world offers an extreme projection of many of today's global issues, fully resonating with the apocalyptic imagination prevalent in contemporary environmental rhetoric, as it depicts a bleak world we could eventually find ourselves in. All of its apocalypticism aside, the novel's environmental ethos may be attributed as much, if not even more, to McCarthy's naturalistic vision, in which the world is but a rock floating in space, people are reduced to animals, and a shopping cart is only a means for transportation. In other words, the end of the world also reveals the nature of things when removed from the context of modernity, allowing for a different perspective to contemplate what is truly meaningful.

As I suspected via my initial hypothesis, what makes *The Road* a compelling environmental novel is the complex duality of its representation – how it presents a world that has faced absolute devastation as a potential warning, while also using this same world to emphasise the importance of things through their collective absence. In this regard, the apocalypse is the single most important aspect of the novel, as it makes the world stand as different and estranged, while also being relatable and recognisable. What is particularly noticeable and consistent about the postapocalyptic world is how McCarthy paints it uniformly cold and grey, with only emptiness echoing throughout the collective ruins of civilisation and nature, and where even the names of things and ideas are fading out of memory and existence. As a consequence, the artifice of many categories of existence such as culture and nature is at last revealed, and even aspects of the human mind such as rational thought and language are shown to be reliant on the environment to draw their referents and metaphors from. The postapocalyptic world then stands as the foundation of the novel's environmental themes due to how it emphasises a view that is remarkably unanthropocentric.

The ambiguous representation of the apocalypse itself further supports environmental readings of the novel. The thoroughly burned landscapes point to a global fire, but what actually happened to the world is only ever mentioned as a single event that stopped all the clocks at once. The apocalypse is deliberately made unexplainable, which in turn invites readings that emphasise a more symbolic significance. As the novel's postapocalyptic world reflects many of the environmental anxieties of the current era, such as climate change and the lack of sustenance due to collapse of local ecosystems, these readings are likely to steer towards environmental apocalypticism in order to discern the meaning of the apocalypse. Furthermore, as fire is the most prominent metaphor for the apocalypse in the novel, it is also possible to consider its symbolic significance as an extended environmental metaphor relating to the development of human civilisation and its interaction with the surrounding world. The apocalypse in *The Road* may then be read as an escalation of the current environmental issues, as the fire symbolising the apocalypse also implicitly points to processes such as agriculture, industrialisation and globalisation as the indirect causes for the end of the world.

Based on its overall representation of the apocalypse, *The Road* stands as a significant departure from most postapocalyptic fiction. As postapocalyptic narratives have traditionally focused on the fall of society and how individuals or communities survive in an era after the modern world, McCarthy's novel is decidedly unanthropocentric in contrast, as it presents its few human characters as barely clinging onto the dying world. Unlike many contemporary postapocalyptic novels, which may be considered dystopic, *The Road* de-emphasises human affairs, often presenting them in the background or meaningless in favour of depicting the world itself. As postapocalyptic settings with their transformed worlds present narrative spaces for exploring humanity's place in the world, so too does *The Road*, but in a different way, as it uses the postapocalypse to emphasise how there can be no humanity in a world with no environment to support it.

In the second part of my analysis I argued how the environmental meanings in *The Road* are complemented by how the novel stands as complex pastoral for the Anthropocene. Throughout the novel, McCarthy employs the pastoral mode by portraying the human relationship with the environment from a perspective that is humbling and often quite literally down-to-earth. This pastoral representation is then complicated by how the novel's view of our ongoing relation with the natural world emphasises precisely the kind of issues relevant today – specifically ones related to the idea of nature itself becoming problematic due to the pervasive influence of human actions on the global ecosystem. As such, the complex pastoral of the late modern era is more about whether there is any nature to go back to at all. With awareness of global environmental issues such as climate change, human history has become inseparable from natural history, and the novel's apocalypse reflects the Anthropocene imagination by signalling not only the end of human society, but the end of natural history altogether.

The complex pastoral of *The Road* is established through how the novel uses this changed context to examine underlying pastoral assumptions from a point of view that can be considered post-pastoral. The novel's depiction of a denatured world that still does not feel completely unnatural communicates the post-pastoral idea of nature as processes, particularly those relating to the cycle of death and rebirth. *The Road* thus presents a more sustainable idea of how we may consider nature through all things, not only those that intuitively feel natural. This post-pastoral mode is also supported by the novel's pastoral frame of simplicity, as its characters are constantly at the mercy of the environment, which instils a feeling of humbling awe towards the natural world while also promoting a recognition of human embeddedness in the environment. As such, the novel's post-pastoral representation further emphasises the interconnectedness of all aspects of the world, and how environmental thought likewise has to permeate all aspects of human culture rather than being just a part of it in order for the future to be sustainable.

Finally, the novel's post-pastoral elements are reinforced by how it approaches the pastoral's attitudes to time – specifically the universal preference for a simpler and a more natural past existence, which in turn may be reflected in visions for a better future. Throughout its narrative, *The Road* constantly looks towards the past, but this backwards gaze is actively post-pastoral as these images avoid idealised depictions and instead emphasise the cold realities of the world regardless of time. The novel also uses the different perspectives of its main characters to further undermine the pastoral assumptions, as the boy is unlike his father able to witness even the postapocalyptic world – the only world he has ever known – as ordinary and even natural. By de-emphasising the ideological effects of pastoralism and its preference for a simpler past, the novel instead promotes an appreciation of the present. This reminder that the present is the only world that will ever exist, in turn contributes to the novel's overall environmental message about how we will have to change our collective attitudes towards the world, as there will not be a world after.

A novel such as *The Road* is only one example of a literary text that can be considered through a post-pastoral perspective that emphasises a changed view towards human relationship with the environment. Since its release over ten years ago, the atmosphere around the discourse of climate change in particular has slowly but surely escalated, as questions about the sustainability of our current way of life have arguably become a degree more urgent. What this thesis hopefully demonstrates is that if even a bleak postapocalyptic novel such as *The Road* can be considered as the basis of post-pastoral representation that signals a hopeful change in our attitudes towards the surrounding world, such a perspective may also be applied to examine other textual and even non-textual representations of the environment, and perhaps one day the way we imagine and talk about the world will have an effect on how we treat it as well.

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